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Sharing The True Colors: An Exploration Of Theatre Created By Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, And Transgender Youth

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SHARING THE TRUE COLORS:
AN EXPLORATION OF THEATRE CREATED BY
GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER YOUTH

by

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A.B. Rollins College, 2002

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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ABSTRACT

True Colors: Out Youth Theater at The Theater Offensive is a Boston based program that focuses its theatrical and social mission on engaging Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered (GLBT) at-risk, youth and the community that surrounds them. Through the process of generating an original touring production, True Colors employs theatre as a tool for personal, social, and artistic expression, empowerment, and activism. The program's balance of both process and product focused goals creates an environment of multifaceted engagement and provides an example of how art can thrive in a structure of youth outreach. Though directors and facilitators guide the process and final product, a fundamental mission of True Colors is to provide a student or youth-centered experience where inspiration, decisions, discussions, and leadership generates directly from participants. By observing and participating in the creation of one of these productions, I explore the impact of this student-centered structure on the personal perspectives and artistic growth of the GLBT participants and the artistic process of creating the production. My goal is to discover True Colors' effectiveness of achieving its mission to both create an impactful and positive process for the youth and also develop a final product that is artful and evokes social change. Additionally, by studying similar programs, I establish a basis of comparison against True Colors in order to develop a broader view of the field and evaluate the variances in methodology and the impact on youth and communities.

This thesis is dedicated to Stephen for always displaying love and patience throughout this journey.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Several programs throughout the country focus their missions on using theater as an empowerment tool for youth development, artistic growth, and community engagement. This study spotlights one of these groups, True Colors: Out Youth Theater, and its journey through the youth-centered, theatrical process. By observing and participating with this troupe, I examine their techniques used for creating a production and fostering youth empowerment. Through studying the successes and challenges True Colors faces in program implementation, I attempt to identify effective methods and raise questions for further study.

There are numerous theories suggesting the intrinsic nature of theatre to positively impact the lives of young people. Additionally, there are exceptional programs and companies all over the United States that provide illustrations of these theories in practice. However, Boston based, The Theater Offensive True Colors: Out Youth Theater distinguishes itself in numerous categories. By serving at-risk, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer and questioning youth and their straight allies (LGBTQ) youth ages 14-22, True Colors distinguishes itself because they target a specific demographic with unique social struggles and experiences. Although there is sufficient study on programs designed to impact specific groups such as at-risk youth, few scholars explore the emergent LGBTQ youth arts sector. This may be a result of the few programs that exist and lingering social misconceptions about the combination of youth and the study of sexual orientation/identity. Furthermore, the troupe's mission to empower young people through their youth-centered model provides useful details and an opportunity to understand the value of such programming to a community who, even still, faces oppression and discrimination

on multiple levels. This study discusses both the importance of empowering young adults and the correlation this empowerment has on the LGBTQ youth community and individuals.

Methodology

My role as the Education Intern in the True Colors, fall 2008 Troupe permitted me to assist The Theater Offensive Education Director, Evelyn Francis, in planning, administration, and implementing programming. Over this four month period I acted as an assistant director, facilitator, mentor, chaperon, brainstorming team member, administrative assistant and in any other capacity needed by the troupe. Being able to perform these responsibilities afforded me the opportunity to observe and participate in multiple levels of True Colors' process. Much of this ethnographic study gathers qualitative research based on observation and interviews with youth and adult participants combined with related scholarly research and personal reflection.

I invited the troupe members and adult staff of True Colors to participate in this study with the explanation of its purpose and my intention to observe and interview each of them. Evelyn encouraged all fall 2008 troupe members to join this study with the hopes of gathering multiple perspectives but I understood the reality that age and circumstance might not allow all of them to provide proper consent. For instance, several members, under the age of 18, could not obtain proper parental permission. In those cases, troupe members were not interviewed and not individually recognized as part of my observations. In all, 11 of the original 14 troupe members provided proper consent and decided to participate in this study. Although, 7 of the 11 are older than 18, I do not use any of their real names for the sake of anonymity.

Most of my observation occurred in the rehearsal and touring of the fall troupe production entitled Not Just a Character. However, I also include observations of instances that took place within The Theater Offensive office in direct relation to True Colors programming and youth mentoring. For instance, much of my observation of Evelyn includes her interactions with youth and staff and conversations with me during my office hours. That being said, as a participant as well as an observer, I gathered firsthand knowledge of the process but my presence within the troupe helped to define some of the experience of the participants.

I chose to conduct interviews with troupe members and staff in order to gain detailed knowledge about specific individuals or opinions that might shed light on what I observed. I scattered these interviews throughout the troupe rehearsal and touring period in order to gather perspectives at different points in the process. Although the most enlightening moments arose from my observations, these interviews provided an opportunity for the youth to verbally reflect on circumstances that occurred throughout the troupe. These one-on-one conversations offer important insight to this study because often group reflections left little time for in-depth dialogue. Additionally, these interviews presented extra specificity and perspective to my own reflection by filling in the details and clarifying any personal misperceptions.

I also held interviews with several founders and directors of LGBTQ youth theatre programs throughout the United States in order to compare and contrast further ideas and techniques and provide analysis of my findings. I chose and contacted each of these individuals specifically because of the similarity of their programming to that of True Colors. These

interviews offer a spectrum of practices and methods but also a foundation of how to begin conducting this work no matter the locality.

While there is little study about LGBTQ youth arts, there is documentation about theatre and youth programs designed for the adolescent development. This study uses this documentation as a basis to compare and inform my research because there are inherent and consistent traits in this type of programming.

I came to True Colors as a professional actor, director, and teaching artist to gain knowledge and experience with which to refine techniques used when working with young adults focused on social change and not as a clinician or drama therapist. My observations and personal reflection in this study mirror this perspective. I draw conclusions grounded in research, experience, and professional training but this study only investigates one season or “troupe” of True Colors with a specific makeup of individuals and personalities. An examination of another or multiple troupes might yield different conclusions.

As a gay male, True Colors fascinated my attention because I relate to and support the social-activist goals of its participants and founders. Also, the troupe spurred my curiosity because of its unique structure of combining theatre with group collaboration and personal storytelling in hopes of creating a stronger community. I don’t deny that my personal biases towards True Colors’ mission of LGBTQ equality and inclusion will color my observation and analysis in this study. In fact, I embrace this in the hope that my investment in the work and the youth provide a unique perspective to other practitioners. That being said, I use my experience as

a theatre artist and research to objectively analyze True Colors' techniques in order to learn from the solutions and questions they create.

CHAPTER TWO: OVERVIEW

Although this study discusses and analyzes the techniques and process of True Colors in detail, it is essential to understand the basic structure because it is extremely unique. True Colors is both the title of an education program and touring company within The Theater Offensive. This parent organization is a professional theatre company that produces LGBTQ related works in the Boston Metro Area and beyond through its various programs. This includes theater festivals, original works, community activism, special events, and youth outreach/development through its True Colors program. According to the company website the theater is “grounded in its commitment to build an activist-based artistic forum, its groundbreaking programming has become a vital arena for the unique voices of diverse queer cultures, and has led to lasting coalitions between the varied communities under the queer umbrella” (TheTheaterOffensive.org). The education department, led by Evelyn Francis, oversees the administration, planning, implementation, hiring, and artistic/directing responsibilities of True Colors. She is assisted by one or two adult interns and Magda Spasiano, the Education Associate who coordinates tour bookings and summer programming.

A typical year of True Colors breaks into three seasons or troupes: fall, spring, and summer. The fall, much like the spring, follows the format of creating an original production, including script-writing, rehearsal, and touring the show within a 16 week time period. The summer is a project True Colors is working towards. It is planned as a month-long training intensive covering different themes/subjects each year (i.e. acting training, sketch writing, etc.).

The primary focus of this study examines the structure of the fall and spring troupes. Both troupes begin with an audition of youth ranging in ages from 14-22. Because True Colors gears itself to LGBTQ youth, most of the marketing takes place within other similar youth organizations but also to audience members who fall within the same age range. A majority of the youth identify somewhere in the spectrum of LGBTQ, but the troupe is open to straight-allies. There is no requirement that youth categorize themselves or reveal any specific sexual orientation or gender-identity. Also no previous theatrical experience is necessary but all must interview with Evelyn, present a creative demonstration (typically a monologue), and pass an ensemble audition. There is a maximum of 15 participants within a troupe, which means not everyone is offered a position. The selected youth must sign a contract agreement with The Theater Offensive as they are paid a modest, monthly stipend for their participation. Those under the age of 18 must obtain a legal-guardian signature on their contracts in order to be paid. Each member must re-apply to each troupe and may participate in as many as possible until they age out at 22.

Both the fall and spring troupes divide into three basic sections; training/creation, rehearsal, and touring. The troupe meets every Tuesday and Thursday from 6pm until 9pm, with a few exceptions. For the first few weeks the troupe receives basic actor/ensemble training and move to writing and devising their original production. Once the show is in rough-draft form, the youth go through a “week intensive” where they are called every night of the week to select subject matter, create much of the script/characters, settle on rough blocking and, at the end, present a preview performance for audience feedback. After the week intensive, the youth polish

the piece, taking in the audience reaction, and work towards creating a final version. At the same time they begin to learn lines and finalize roles. Once a final 30-45 minute piece is in place, the troupe continuously runs the show with the addition of basic props, sound, and sometimes, minimal costumes (there is typically no lights or set). All the youth perform in the piece and divide any technical needs between themselves and interns.

The final component of a troupe is the tour. This portion usually books months in advance by the education department who arrange 2-3 tour sites a week. Locations range from high schools, community groups and events, other youth programs, conferences, government social service and health departments, and anyone else who wishes to bring True Colors to their location. Venues that have the ability pay the program to present the show which helps to cover the cost associated with transporting the young people (either by van or public transportation), staffing, and overhead. Otherwise, the tour is supported by outside funding and those who can't afford to pay the troupe arrange a performance or workshop sharing. Although the troupe can tour anywhere in New England, typical locations rest within a day's drive from Boston as some youth miss school (with permission) to perform. Venues vary in size from large high school auditoriums to business conference rooms, depending on the audience. As a result, staging and technical needs remain minimal but adjust upon arrival to a site. The only requirement given to locations is that they provide enough chairs for any staging and an open space for performers and audience. At the end of each performance there is a 15-20 minute talk-back lead by the youth. In all, the entire presentation lasts no longer than 50-60 minutes, usually to accommodate high school class schedules. According to Evelyn, these productions reach up to 20 different

audiences a troupe (approximately 2000 individuals) and culminate in a final friends and family performance (Francis Personal). When a particular troupe ends the next troupe starts the process all over again with a new ensemble, script, and tour venues.

CHAPTER THREE: THE FOUNDATION

In order to examine the current practices and techniques used by True Colors to empower youth and impact the surrounding community, I explored the elements that led to the creation of the troupe and its mission. The program was founded to serve a population of young people with specific social and support needs not met by the government, schools, or occasionally, the families they live with. Therefore, it is important to understand the LGBTQ social and political environment within Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts during the troupe's inception because it is integral to its formation and development. Coinciding with looking at the environment is exploring the rationale behind using theatre as a medium to service the needs of the local LGBTQ youth community because it is from the art-form itself that most of the inner-structure arose.

Social and Political Environment

True Colors formation was a direct result of real-life challenges, actions, and decisions in both social and political spheres taking place in the surrounding community. For the purpose of this study I investigated social issues that LGBTQ youth face at a broad level but also narrow in on how these issues generate at-risk behaviors local to the Boston community.

One of the major challenges that led to True Colors was the rate of school bullying of LGBTQ youth. In her book, How Homophobia Hurts Children: Nurturing Diversity at Home, at School, and in the Community author Jean M. Baker describes the negative impact social biases

have on the lives LGBTQ youth. She points to the issue of bullying faced by these young people and its effect on them. For instance, homophobia from their peers can cause gay children, “to hate that part of themselves that others seem to hate, a process that is called internalized-homophobia. This is the process of incorporating in one’s own self image the negative feelings associated with the label “homosexual” and it can cripple hope and dreams of a productive future” (Baker 6). She discusses how bullying is a common and, sometimes, socially dismissed trend found in all spectrums of school life. As a result, those targeted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity face other at-risk behaviors. In particular “when children suspected of being gay are harassed and tormented by their peers with minimal reaction from their teachers or administrators, the underlying message is that homosexuals deserve to be mistreated” (10).

Though LGBTQ people face this type of bias or harassment in all stages of life, youth, especially adolescents, are much more vulnerable to the negative impact of such actions. Baker describes:

At a time when heterosexual adolescents are learning how to socialize, young gay people are learning how to hide. It is at this time ... that the realization by homosexual adolescents of the difference from their peers can be a major stumbling block in the development of a positive adolescent identity. Through these crucial years they must learn to cope with the knowledge of their difference and with the even more painful knowledge that this difference is associated with stigma and negative stereotypes. (41)

The research and sentiments I listed here are only a small portion of the detail Baker elaborates on in regards to the challenges facing LGBTQ youth. In order to quantify these statements proposed by Baker, studies such as the biennial National Safe Schools Climate Survey (NSCS) conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (MYRBS) detail specific statistics so governments and agencies grasp the social disproportion of LGBTQ young people. Reporting for GLSEN in the 2005 NSCS survey, Dr. Joseph Kosciw explains the bullying trend occurring in our nation's schools:

Respondents to the 2005 NSCS reported that homophobic remarks were the most common type of biased language heard at school, with three-quarters of the students (75.4%) hearing remarks such as “faggot” or “dyke” frequently or often at school. Even more pervasive was the use of the expression “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay,” often used to indicate that something or someone is stupid or worthless. Nearly nine out of ten (89.2%) students reported hearing these comments frequently or often at school. (Kosciw xii-xiii)

Although, this portion of the NSCS survey highlights verbal bullying in the school environment, the MYRBS moves a bit further and analyzes further risks which could be a direct correlation of the above findings and Baker's conclusions. As table 1 displays the percentages of at-risk behavior are disproportionate for LGB Youth (the 2007 MYRBS does not survey Transgendered students).

Table 1:

Comparison Between Risky Behaviors In Students

Reported Behaviors	GLB Students	Other Students
Attempted suicide in the past year	29.1	6.4
Required medical attention as a result of a suicide attempt	12.1	2.2
Skipped school in the past month because of feeling unsafe on route to or at school	13.3	4.2
Was threatened/injured with a weapon at school in the past year	18.7	4.5
Was in a physical fight resulting in treatment by doctor or nurse	12.7	3.7

Source: Massachusetts, Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Educ., 2007 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Boston: 2008).

Over the last two decades, more and more governments and agencies began to understand and respond to these studies and reports in order to create a safer community for all of its residents. Though the previous statistics provide current numbers, it is through surveys such as these that alerted the government of Massachusetts to the perils of ignoring the risks faced by LGBTQ youth and the need to change these types of trends. In his book, When the Drama Club is Not Enough: Lessons from the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students, Massachusetts educational policy advisor and LGBTQ Youth Rights advocate Jeff Perrotti

describes the history, motivations, and methodology of regulations and programs required by the state government to fulfill these desperate needs. Although neither the GLSEN or MYRBS surveys took place when Perrotti began his work, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released studies in regards to the causes of youth suicide. “In January 1989 DHHS released a Report of The Secretary’s Task Force on Youth Suicide stating that 30 percent of youth suicides are committed by Lesbian Gay and Bisexual young people” (Perrotti 2). As a result, the Republican Candidate for Governor of Massachusetts, William Weld, issued a campaign promise to “find ways to reduce the high rate of suicide among lesbian and gay youth and to prevent the violence perpetuated against them” (2). Winning the Governorship, Weld fulfilled this promise and established a commission to explore how to curtail the staggering statistics coming out of the LGBTQ youth community. As with many other social and educational advancements in the United States, Massachusetts lead the way in innovation on this issue by listening to the testimonies of educators, parents, social service providers and LGBTQ youth. The findings of this commission provided four specific recommendations:

1. Develop policies that protect Lesbian and Gay Students from harassment, violence, and discrimination.
2. Offer school personnel training in violence prevention and suicide prevention.
3. Offer school-based support groups for gay, lesbian, and heterosexual students.

4. Provide school based counseling for family members of gay and lesbian students. (Perrotti 3)

As a result, Governor Weld's commission pushed for the formation of the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian students in the Massachusetts Department of Education and, eventually, legislators included Sexual Orientation as a protected class in the student anti-discrimination law. Jeff Perrotti took the reins at Safe Schools and began establishing programs and studies to create safe environments for LGBTQ youth. It is with the Safe Schools Program, and Perrotti at its helm, that lead to the formation and implementation of what is now True Colors.

Forming True Colors

In my interview with True Colors founder and current Artistic Director of The Theater Offensive, Abe Rybeck, I uncovered how these statistics and the formation of Safe Schools led directly to the troupe's formation and its continued relevance in the Boston Community. He states:

The Theater Offensive originally grew out of activist theater group called United Fruit Company but there was not any kind of youth focus. However, when we produced the first TTO show, it had a major youth presence and participation. We even produced a play dealing with youth issues. The major impetus for the True Colors program, which it was not yet called that, was the 1993 initiation of the Safe Schools Program. I was approached by Jeff Perrotti who felt there was a lack

of a cultural component in Safe Schools and asked TTO to draft a program guide to demonstrate how such a component could fit. We drafted a guide and then turned around and applied TTO to take part in the programming. We were accepted and received funding from the state to run a cultural component using theatre. (Rybeck Personal)

Abe explained to me that from its outset, the TTO youth program attempted to mitigate many of the challenges the youth face and fill a social void by providing safe and positive outlets for LGBTQ youth. However, although the TTO program began with backing from the Commonwealth and Safe Schools, it struggled for the involvement of LGBTQ youth. For example, they connected with theatre teachers and organizations to find participants but the first “troupe” consisted of only 12 youth who either identified as straight allies or would not admit to being gay. Most of the performances venues consisted of teacher training sessions which helped fulfill the requirements of the Safe Schools program. However, he knew he wanted the troupe to serve young people and not teachers/administrators. As a result, the focus, from the beginning, rested in the “stories of the young people. They picked the topics to discuss, talked about their own experiences, and created scenes/scripts” (Rybeck Personal).

For the few years after the inception of the youth programming, funding and organizational structures began to falter. As Abe puts it, “funding and programming were spotty” (Rybeck Personal). However, with a mission of providing this much needed outlet for the youth, TTO focused their efforts on better organizing the structure and funding sources to create a viable program.

Although it continues to evolve with private and public support, True Colors serves many of the mandates established by Governor Weld's Commission and Safe schools. Furthermore, Governor Weld and Safe Schools generated the dialogue and mandates to create the right social and political environment for True Colors to thrive. As I continue to discover with my research, this type of support is critical especially in regards to a program's structure and positive reaction from the surrounding community because, as Abe puts it, "the backing of such authority helps to legitimize the purpose of organizations like True Colors" (Rybeck Personal). Otherwise, given the intense social debate about the LGBTQ community, it might be difficult to originate similar programs.

Theatre as a Medium

Appreciating the social and political background of True Colors' formation provides a glimpse into the surrounding environment and the needs it generates. As Baker states "young people who have participated in community-based gay youth support groups often gain the courage to go back to their schools and become involved in support groups in the school setting" (119). However, just as crucial as providing support is the acknowledgement of theatre as a tool of altering the hostile climate faced by LGBTQ youth. According to the True Colors Logic Model developed by TTO, by promoting a safer environment for each of them to live and increasing a sense of belonging, identity, responsibility, and social ability, [the program] hopes to facilitate positive change for participants (The Theater Offensive, Logic Model).

The primary creative process that True Colors uses throughout the program is known as devised theatre. To understand True Colors' use of devising I turn to Alison Oddey, professor of Contemporary Performance at the University of Northampton (UK). In her book Devising Theater: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook she explains that "a devised theatre product is work that has emerged from and been generated by a group of people working in collaboration that can start from anything. It is determined and defined by a group of people who set up initial framework or structure to explore and experiment with ideas, images concepts, themes, or specific stimuli that might include music, text, objects, paintings, or movement" (1). Although Oddey's definition provides a broad definition of devising and True Colors uses a slightly more formulaic and structured format, her interpretation is useful in comprehending the type of theatre the program creates.

Social Change

To understand capacity for social change through theatre it is important to understand its definition in regards to True Colors. For the purposes of this study it means theatre that speaks to collective or social concerns and uses the stage as a way of exemplifying injustice or inequality. When Jeff Perrotti concluded that there needed to be a cultural component to the programming of Safe Schools, he probably understood the importance of connecting teachers, administrators, and students on a personal level so that they could empathize with their LGBTQ students and peers. In theory, this empathy might educate each of them about human diversity but also initiate a change in attitude and behavior, thus creating a safer learning atmosphere for LGBTQ youth.

This concept is one of the components that support the use of theatre as a tool for social change. Allowing True Colors to be a part of the Safe Schools Program provided a creative resource to educate and change the status quo. At its very root, theatre provides an effective platform to observe another person's perspective and journey by watching a story and character come to life onstage.

Professor and ethnographer, Philip Zwerling explains in his book After-School Theater programs for At-Risk Youth the importance and effectiveness of community based theatre organizations on the lives of young people. Although the aim of his study focuses on organizations determined to use theatre to mitigate teen violence in Southern California, his theories and findings apply to LGBTQ youth because many of the conclusions relate to the results of oppression and, especially the oppression of teenagers as a whole.

In regards to social change, much of Zwerling's discussion on the topic centers on using the system and rationale developed by the modern proponent of this theatrical form, Augusto Boal. Zwerling explains that Boal believed that oppressed individuals and groups could use theatre as a source to discuss their oppression. By breaking down the barrier between audience and actor Boal created an opportunity for the oppressed to take part in theater and use real-life situations depicted in theatrical form to create dialogue and develop means to overcome oppressing forces (73). Through the techniques of Forum Theatre, Invisible Theater, and Legislative theatre, among others, Boal explored his coined "Theater of the Oppressed" with groups around the world in hopes of propelling social change. Zwerling explains the connection of Boal to his Study in Los Angeles:

When I began studying Augusto Boal for the first time..., I was energized to discover that theatre could do more than entertain; it could invite participants to democratically examine personal and social issues, rehearse solutions to problems, and equip them to change their lives and society. I learned that many groups were using Boal's techniques and, categorized generally as theatre of the oppressed, working with women, seniors, victims of sexual abuse,... etc. These groups can usually be defined as 'the oppressed.' Teenagers labeled 'at risk,' often define themselves... in the same way. (Zwerling 82-83)

In effect, what Zwerling points to is that the community-based theatre work conducted with the teens in Los Angeles is an extension of Boal's theory and practice. He expresses the groups that he studied do not use Boal's exact techniques, neither does True Colors. However, he points out a key element that those groups and True Colors believe necessary in making these sorts of programs effective in that "plays can be created out of current events and issues by the people who live them" (Zwerling 82). This relates to Boal's work in that the act of developing a script by the youth, through personal stories, might help to create an environment where they can create dialogue and formulate solutions to overcome their oppression. For instance, a youth might develop a scene about school bullying which allows them to confront the bully and consider methods of which to alleviate or deter the situation.

Youth Development

In addition to educating and transforming the minds of the community, True Colors strives to impact the individual lives of the young people. Using certain attributes of the theatrical process and their Logic Model as a guide, True Colors works with youth to help them develop confidence and life-skills needed to become productive members of society. The educational values of theater such as the ability to promote reading, writing, and communication skills, literature, and history, as well as numerous other skills related to the craft, appear on the radar of many educators, scholars, and parents. Zwerling states that “we know theatre and other arts boost academic skills for students” (139). He refers to a study from the College Entrance Examination Board showing “students with four years of arts education in high school outperformed peers with no arts education or arts work experience” (140).

That being said, theatre also contains the ability to produce intrapersonal reflection and interpersonal relationships that feed the person as well as the brain. Philip Zwerling stresses this idea by pointing out three specific concepts that theatre offers to teens that he believes they do not receive from other sources. Through his research he finds that “theatre is transformative, it is a powerful system for learning and self-exploration, and unlike any other activity, it offers an emotional and spiritual catharsis” (Zwerling 155).

Zwerling defends these claims by examining and interweaving the teachings of foremost theorists and practitioners in the theatrical, psychological, and educational world. For example, in the analysis of Aristotle’s theory that tragic theater generates a catharsis or purging of emotion, Zwerling looks at perspectives at both sides of the issue in order to highlight its effect

on youth. From a psychotherapy perspective he points to the opportunity for youth to relive stressful events by retelling them through drama and, in essence, creating a catharsis that leads them to a stronger state of mental health. However, he expresses it is disputable whether catharsis occurs or if it is the audience or actors that go through the experience. Furthermore, he references Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal who believe that a catharsis removes the call to action for the audience because witnessing “dramatic action onstage has taken the place of real action in people’s lives” (Zwerling 161). Fundamentally, by passively witnessing a dramatic hero live the tragic scenario presented before us, we experience a catharsis and remove ourselves from needing to emulate the hero and follow the same tragic actions (161). As a result, Boal’s forum theatre pulls the audience or spect/actors onstage to help resolve the conflict causing an opportunity for them to rehearse the removal of oppression from their own lives and not simply witnessing someone else do it for them .

As I mentioned earlier, True Colors does not adhere to any specific techniques mentioned above. However, Zwerling’s arguments demonstrate the variety of methods theatre can impact and transform the lives of young people, especially those who feel oppressed by their situations. For instance, the act of creating an original piece based on personal experiences may result in a cathartic experience for the individual who wrote it, portrayed a part, or witnessed a fellow troupe member tell the story. On the other hand, brainstorming a dramatic piece might provide an opportunity, as Boal says, to experience a “rehearsal for revolution” of real life situations in the hope of changing our social oppressions. As I continue my exploration with this troupe, I will detail how Zwerling’s conclusion translate and apply to the youth of True Colors.

Furthermore, Zwerling highlights, theatre provides intellectual development by providing individuals a multitude of approaches to learning and situations where they become active agents in their own education (Zwerling 166). Again, this differs from the notion that theatre provides many opportunities for educational experiences in that it also presents different methods in which to learn, appealing to a variety of individual needs and strengths by those who participate. Zwerling expounds this idea by pointing to two educational theorists Howard Gardner and Richard Courtney.

Harvard Professor of Education Howard Gardner, indicates the theory in his book Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences. Fundamentally the theory suggests that each individual learns differently and there are seven basic intelligences through which we gather knowledge: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial representation, musical thinking, kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (naturalist was added later). Zwerling illustrates how this theory relates to his study in that “many of the intelligences have basis in the arts and, in turn, the body itself becomes a medium for learning” (167). For example, kinesthetic intelligence, the competency most associated with acting and dance, relates directly to the use of the body and movement to understand concepts and/or acquire knowledge. Actors frequently discuss understanding the complexities of others by paying attention to gesture, rhythm, and pace of the body in relation to the world around them. The inclination of theatre to use many devices and ideas to implement a single piece of art creates numerous opportunities for the multiple intelligences to appear. As a result, a variety of learner types might find useful tools within

theater to better understand concepts, ideas, theories, etc... that might elude them in a more traditional educational environment.

Theorist Richard Courtney believes that theatre itself promotes a “dramatic intelligence” that should be added to Gardner’s list. Zwerling states:

Courtney’s addition of an eighth intelligence, dramatic intelligence, widens this theory to include the very specific and unique aspects of drama: The playing of multiple roles onstage and off, and the empathy and self-knowledge this requires; the physicalization of learning in the body through gesture, image, costume, and sound; the openness to novelty and change; the need to openly express a myriad of emotions required for all actors; the need to work collectively and to place the social needs of all of the company above one’s own; and the internal discipline of participation, whether it involves learning lines, showing up on time, knowing cues, etc. (Zwerling 168)

In essence, drama itself, according to Zwerling and supported by Gardener, is a device that can be used to gather knowledge and develop intellectually. They do not claim that everyone who participates in drama possesses a dramatic intelligence, but instead there are individuals who learn using dramatic elements.

Through the examples mentioned by Zwerling, he demonstrates that by providing an environment where youth can use their imaginations and bodies to create art, theater provides various opportunities for each individual to develop socially and intellectually. Whether a

teenager confronts and solves a particular oppression or learns how to communicate more effectively, programs like those he explored and professional troupes like True Colors, lay a foundation for personal growth by providing tools and space to explore. In a troupe like True Colors where youth come in with an established and well documented social oppression and a propensity to engage in at-risk behavior, these type of tools for personal development can mean the difference between life or death. Although Abe Rybeck might not have thought about some of the specifics Zwerling highlights, when True Colors formed, he understood the power of theatre to transform lives. As he mentioned in his interview: “True Colors needs to develop the youth as well as the artist (Rybeck Personal).

Conclusion

In effect, the challenges faced by the LGBTQ youth community emphasized by Jean Baker combined with the startling statistics exposed by Governor Weld and Jeff Perrotti establish a social need for True Colors. Furthermore, the arguments that Philip Zwerling presents about the impactful nature of theater on the individual and the society, provides means of which True Colors might tackle these challenges and needs. The following chapters point to specific examples of the methods and examples True Colors utilizes to take on this task.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE YOUTH CENTERED APPROACH

In order to serve as an organization that promotes both artistic and personal development for LGBTQ young people, True Colors relies on a youth-centered approach to structure and facilitate its programming. Because the purpose of this study is to understand how this particular approach encourages youth development I examine the theory behind its principles.

What is Youth-Centered?

There are numerous means to describe a youth-centered approach. Some, especially in an educational setting, label it learner-centered. Others may use the terms youth-driven or youth-led. Although these terms vary in their specifics, each focuses their structures so the youth are active and participatory agents in their personal development, whatever the goal. In a study in which he compares several youth programs and their management structures, University of Illinois Professor of Human Development and Family Studies Reed Larson explains the youth-centered approach in a construct that emulates that of True Colors. “The goal of this approach—more common in community-based youth programs—is often empowerment and promoting youth development of leadership” (Larson 59). Programs such as True Colors view youth as assets and partners in the decision making process, relying on their individual expertise and opinions to reach any set goals. For example, relying on the youth to generate all the written material for a particular script based on personal experiences as a way to communicate and educate the community. This differs from the more classic “adult-driven approach where adults

‘know best,’ that [their] greater knowledge and experience position them to guide program activities” (59).

In examining multiple youth programs, there is a spectrum of the amount of power shared between adults and young people. “At one extreme are programs in which adults set the direction and run daily program activities, with little input from youth. At the other extreme are programs where adults play little role in structuring youth’s activities, as happens in some teen drop-in centers” (Larson 58). According to Larson’s findings, programs that strike an even balance in structure and support provided by adults and leadership and input by the youth better facilitate youth development and meet their desired goals. For instance, a group that is too independent from adults may not possess the proper tools or skill-sets to keep on task. Larson explains in his observations of a particular group: “while the benefits of the youth-driven approach derived from youth’s experience of control, the principle liability we saw lay in conditions where this control broke down and took things in directions that youth and adults viewed as off track (66). On the other hand, a complete adult-centered approach might cause youth to become disengaged because they possess little ownership of the work at hand.

Why Youth-Centered?

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, a primary goal of True Colors is to promote youth development within the local LGBTQ community. In a report for the International Youth Foundation, Dr. Silvia Golombek makes a correlation in the introduction between youth being active agents in programs and their personal development. She states:

If [programs] focus specifically on the contribution we find that the youth development perspective views it both as an input and a desired outcome of effective youth programs. Over the years, we have seen that through opportunities to participate in a community's affairs, young people gain self esteem, confidence, and essential life skills such as decision making, conflict management, teamwork, and the ability to work in diverse environments. As they build these competencies, youth begin to think of themselves as partners and stakeholders in society. (Golombek 7)

Although Golombek is speaking on broader scale programs that promote community involvement and citizenship and not a program as specific as True Colors, she describes the trend of youth development programs shifting from seeing young people as recipients of services to youth as resources. In effect, programs meet their desired outcomes by partnering with youth and in turn, create individual outcomes for the youth that promote skill sets that prepare them for adulthood as active citizens. Often, as is the case with True Colors, many of the institutional goals are in line with and take into account the developmental goals of the youth themselves. As confirmed by Larson's study, some of these goals might include establishing professional work and leadership experience, building intellectual and communication ability, forming community, and problem solving. By committing itself to a youth centered approach, a program has the ability to provide opportunities for growth and development that aren't often afforded to young people (Larson 70).

However, this approach compels adults to shift their thinking about youth because of the hierarchical statures that society often places on the relationships and there are risks. “Adults involved in efforts that engage youth in areas such as planning and implementation, evaluation, and decision-making are comfortable with the notion that project results may be different than if they had been conducted by adults only” (Golombek 69). For example, a group of youth might take more time with meeting a project deadline because they don’t have all the skills necessary or veer down unnecessary paths before they find the most efficient one. This is part of the youth development process and as Golombek recognizes “the projects that emerge from adult-youth collaborations are a more accurate reflection of the community as a whole” (69).

Can Youth-Centered Work With Theatre?

Theatre creates a hierarchical system within itself that might stymie the theory of a youth-centered process. Many formats mixing theatre and young people prescribe the relationship that adults direct, lead, or teach the youth. Couple this with the pressure of producing a final product consisting of inexperienced youth and it is easy to see why some could be wearisome of using this approach with this art form. As Larson states: “A primary objective of programs using an adult-centered approach is often to teach specialized skills, and thus, it is particularly common in sports and performance arts, where there are specific technical skills that youth desire to learn” (59). This point raises the question about how can we pass on the knowledge necessary to reach the artistic goals of a program but at the same time still provide a youth-centered structure?

One of the youth programs that Larson examines in his study is a high school theatre production, which for the most part is adult-centered with the adult making a majority of the decisions as director and teacher. That being said, he points to specific techniques used by this program that still empower and engage the students while at the same time, provide them with the skills they need and keep the production on track. For example, the director created a culture of fairness and opportunity and listened to and provided opportunity for feedback from the youth (Larson 69). He goes on to say:

These techniques permitted the youth ... a strong identification with the program: to feel ownership and sustain active engagement in the program's agenda. The adult... used their authority on the youths' behalf. Although students may not have had the level of ownership evident in the youth-driven programs, the director created learning experiences within which youth became active learners. (Larson 69)

In this case the premise of exchanging knowledge and allowing for a constant dialogue, empowered the youth to feel that they greatly impacted the overall project because they obtained the proper tools to complete the task and they could easily communicate their opinions to the adults. However, this environment took on a more traditional power-structure for a creating a production.

Conversely, Dr. Linda Lang, professor of drama education, investigates theatre practitioners who use a youth centered approach she terms "collective creation." She defines this technique as: "both a collaborative process undertaken by actors/students and their

director/teacher and the creative product or "play" that results from that ... process" (Lang 48). This is quite different from a traditional play because it is written by a group of individuals, it "usually encompasses a variety of viewpoints or 'episodes' around a theme or idea rather than telling a plot-driven story", and participants take on and share all the theatrical responsibilities (actor, technician, designer, etc...) throughout the process (Lang 48). This particular organizational and artistic structure is very specific but offers several solutions of how theatre might be structured and presented with young people and adults working as partners.

For example, in her findings, Lang discovered that "while the drama teacher must give over creative control of the collective's content to the students, teachers must plan and structure the collective process very carefully and stay in control of how that process unfolds for the students" (Lang 57). In essence, adults provide the framework and tools necessary for the youth to successfully use their creativity in a way that is productive and beneficial to the project. This idea corresponds with Larson's finding that there be a balance in the adult-youth structure in order to progress with program goals and still empower young people.

Additionally, Lang explains what this approach might offer to young people: Collective Creation "supports students' emotional and cognitive learning and growth at an individual level, provides a vehicle for [youth] to develop social skills, introduces them to the art of theatre and allows them to practice and refine their artistic skills, and they learn about social issues in such a way that their knowledge base is extended through meaningful learning opportunities" (Lang 58-59). Again, this relates to the idea of youth-centered work providing a positive outlet for individual development both as artists and members of society. Also, this particular process

allows for the integration of youth voices into an original artistic product that can be shared with a greater audience and presenting another opening for empowerment by the mere fact that their work is on display and could impact others.

However, the question about this work I most ask myself is: can a youth-worker still achieve high artistic quality and control without losing the key aspects of the youth-centered approach? Larson and Lang discuss programs that fall in opposite ends of the spectrum and both establish that many teachers/directors worry about this very nature of the theory. Additionally, this is a concern for True Colors as it is billed as a professional tour company but is made up of fledgling actors. Their structure mirrors that of the “collaborative creation” model but how do they achieve a tour-ready product? If it does not meet a certain quality, do they reach their audience in a way that still motivates them to enact change? As I dig deeper into the practices and observations of the fall troupe, I’ll uncover how this approach affects the artistry of the youth and final performance.

Conclusion

The youth-centered approach allows for a multitude of opportunities for individual growth and empowerment. It can engage youth to create an original work of art that they take responsibility for and allow for partnerships with adults in a world where they can be marginalized. The research states that a balance between structure and autonomy creates a productive, yet empowering environment. Again, how can all this remain intact while also creating a piece of art that demands a level of quality to engage its audiences? Furthermore with

a group that specifically caters to LGBTQ youth, it will be interesting to investigate how this approach prepares them to be positive and active adults and artists, but at the same time, strengthen and educate an entire community.

CHAPTER FIVE: CREATING THE ENSEMBLE

The process True Colors uses to create ensemble and an original piece of theatre generates from an application of a multitude of techniques gathered over the course of the troupe's existence. As the director for over the last seven years, Evelyn infuses exercises from various practitioners such as Augusto Boal, Michael Rohd and Viola Spolin as well as forming her own hybrid techniques to reach particular goals with the group. One of these goals is to create a safe-space where the youth are free to discuss personal issues without fear of retaliation and also establish an environment to have fun and explore personal artistry. It is these exercises and the youth reactions to them that reveal the beginning stages of empowerment of this group.

Auditions

The first time I interacted with the youth of True Colors occurred during the auditions and interviews for the fall 2008 troupe. In preparation for my role as intern Evelyn explained that “each troupe is different and what is needed from me becomes clear as the group dynamic forms” (Francis Personal). My role in auditions, as well as that of my co-intern and former troupe member Henry, was to be a second pair of eyes and ears for Evelyn in order to assist in evaluating the audition and interviews.

The first night of auditions consisted of interviewing returning troupe members. As each entered the room they hugged Evelyn and sat down to get started. Many, like Maggie and TC who were two troupe members with a several year history with True Colors, updated her about

summer events and sometimes, gossip. Although the returning members skipped a formal audition, Evelyn used this interview to talk about strengths and areas of improvement based on previous troupe experiences. She also discussed their level of commitment to the troupe as well as their goals inside and outside of the troupe for the near and long term. Before the youth entered the room she had them fill out an evaluation form that asked them to state these personal goals. For example, several of the youth set the goal of acquiring employment or applying for colleges by the end of the year. Others mentioned working on specific theatre skills like playwriting or voice work to make them stronger artists. Manuel, one of the older youth who arrived in a button up shirt and dress slacks, talked about coming to the troupe specifically so he could learn additional skills useful for film auditions. As with all the interviews Evelyn offered him suggestions about tools and assistance in which he could reach these goals. This progressed into a conversation about how to find casting websites, where to and how to procure headshots and preparing a resume. For others, like TC who mentioned looking for employment or applying for colleges, she offered to write letters of recommendation and assist in finding scholarship applications. She explained at the end of the troupe they review this base evaluation to help measure how many of the goals they met.

Throughout the process of the interviews she listened to hear if there were any specific training or responsibilities she could incorporate into rehearsals to help the youth reach their goals. For instance, many of the youth explained that they wanted to work on their leadership skills. To help meet this goal Evelyn decided to continue the peer-leadership positions that she developed in the previous season. TC and Maggie requested to take on two of these roles of

Assistant Director and Stage Manager, respectively. Although a conversation about this occurred before the interviews, Evelyn took the time to have them reiterate their interest and remind them of the responsibilities involved. Specifically she talked about the need for the peer leaders to stand as role models for the rest of the troupe. Maggie suggested that taking on this position would help her to become more responsible and prove to others that she could handle the responsibility. TC talked about ideas he formulated over the summer about possible music and maybe a dance combination in the piece. Evelyn listened and responded to their ideas with suggestions about how they might see them to fruition. Both TC and Maggie agreed to the terms of the positions and Evelyn assigned them to their new roles.

At the end of evening Evelyn, Henry, and I spoke about what we observed in the interviews. Although he raised a few concerns about slight “drama” between a few of the youth, Henry mentioned that everyone seemed ready to work and dedicate themselves to the program. In my response I discussed my observation of the relaxed relationship the youth demonstrated between each other and with Evelyn. She replied that True Colors helps everyone involved bond as a family. At this point, she explained that all 6 returning members could take part in the new troupe. She also mention that once she selects the returning members she better understands the dynamic of how this troupe will operate and therefore guides her choices for new members.

The following evenings consisted of interviews and auditions for new troupe applicants. Would-be participants arrived one by one for their time slots. For some this was the first time auditioning for any sort of group and for others; this was familiar territory. Within the first few minutes in discussion with each of the youth Evelyn explained the high level of time and

personal commitment needed for the troupe. The reasoning, she explained to me later, is that “there are many youth who want to join but sometimes their situation, personal or otherwise, is too much of an obstacle. This is a big commitment and they need to be in a place where they can make that promise” (Francis Personal). However, a majority of the youth coming in spoke of True Colors’ reputation of taking a lot of work and time, but the commitment wasn’t a factor to deter them from auditioning.

One particular youth, Ricky, immediately entered the room and quickly discussed his knowledge and amazement at the opportunity to audition for True Colors. He admitted being only 15 and never having taken part in any sort of theatre activity but explained that he had “star potential” and could cry on cue. Evelyn quickly asked him to demonstrate this talent. Ricky, who actually looked younger than 15, scrunched up his face, his long eyelashes closed shut and he began to tremble ever so slightly. Within a moment there were tears coming down his face. The group of us in the room gently applauded and he lifted his face with a big smile. Afterwards, Evelyn continued the conversation about his interest and commitment to the program.

Others, like Brie, a young woman in her twenties that tried several times before to get into the troupe, wrote a poem and recited it as part of her audition. As with many of the pieces, she talked about the trials and benefits of love and relationship. When she finished, Evelyn asked her about the process of the creating the poem but also whether or not this time she felt ready to fully commit to joining the troupe. Brie expressed her desire to participate and her promise to do whatever it takes to stay.

Outside the interviews, as part of their leadership responsibilities, returning troupe members greeted applicants and led them in theatre games while waiting for their interview. This served three purposes; it assisted in the logistics of the evening and second, allowed an opportunity for the returning youth to determine how the applicants interacted with one another and the group, and established returning troupe members as leadership figures. Niko, one of the quieter returning troupe members, sat and welcomed each person in and tried to strike up conversations with those auditioning to ease them into the evening.

Once the interviews concluded, all returning members and applicants gathered together for Evelyn (with the assistance of Maggie and TC) to lead them in exercises as part of a group audition. Both of the new peer leaders quickly requested the certain activities to be played. These included name games, body and voice warm-ups, improvisation games, a writing exercise, and the creation of a short devised piece based on the writing. During this time the returning troupe members, along with Evelyn, noted group dynamics and applicants gathered a sense of the type of activities offered. The group worked together as they might in a rehearsal.

After the auditions, the applicants left for the evening. Evelyn and the returning troupe members remained for a group discussion about the session. During this time they discussed each and every applicant and their viability as a troupe member. Sitting in a circle, one by one they went over their observations of acting skills, group interaction, and overall fit with the troupe. The majority of the conversation revolved around praising the applicants with the needed strengths to be part of the troupe. For instance, some of the youth talked about how well certain individuals “fit in” or their talent in improvisation games. However, some applicants raised

concerns from certain returning members. In particular, one conversation regarding a youth placed Evelyn on the defensive. She felt the youth needed a chance to take part but a majority of the group felt otherwise. This prompted a very vocal debate about the pros and cons of this applicant. At one point only one or two members continued the deliberation while the others sat without saying a word. In the end, each member voted yea or nay whether they felt an individual applicant should receive a membership slot. However, the final decision rested with Evelyn who made the phone call to each accepted applicant over the following days.

In all, Evelyn accepted 14 youth out of 17 who auditioned, including the 6 returning troupe members (12-15 is a typical troupe size). Ranging from ages 15-22, this group made up with a diverse mix of race and cultural backgrounds including Latin American, Caucasian, African American, and Asian. There was also a combination of Bostonians and suburbanites, some taking hour long trains to get to the rehearsal space in Downtown Boston. There was also a diverse makeup from the LGBTQ community with members identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgendered but with a lack of straight-allies. In fact, Niko represented a sexual identity group that I was unfamiliar with known as genderqueer. In essence, Niko doesn't specifically identify with any gender, representing both male and female traits. In the end, it seemed a varied group.

Reflection

Overall, the auditions offered me an opportunity to witness the beginning stages of the youth-centered approach with True Colors. First, the youth played a vital part in defining their

own goals and roles within the fall troupe. This allows them to establish what they want to gain from the experience and how they would like to participate without Evelyn prescribing something specific. For instance, Manuel came in knowing exactly what his reason was for returning to the troupe. Although his previous experience taught him what Evelyn expects out of members, by allowing him to first articulate his needs she centers the interview on the youth.

Second, their participation and assistance in facilitating the new member selection process provided them leadership responsibilities to create their new troupe. Although she makes final decisions, she explains, “that their input is necessary in order to use their voices as a guide” (Francis Personal). Also, it assists in establishing that they help to create the troupe. This helps to establish the foundation needed for members to continue to build their influence over the troupe because they were able to make decisions from the beginning.

That being said, I wonder if the youth could contribute more in order to assist in this beginning process? For example, in my interview with Troy, a new troupe member with theatre experience outside of this program, he proposed “a more rigorous audition process to weed out those not as devoted to our goals” (Troy Personal). He and other troupe members echoed that artistic standards could rise by demanding a memorized audition piece, perhaps performed for all troupe members. Would the youth have more impact if they took part in the interview process and obtained the final word in who receives a membership? In this circumstance, if a member does not live up to the requirements or work ethic needed by the troupe, members can only look to themselves. Would this not provide more responsibility and direct accountability for the youth?

On the other hand, allowing Evelyn to format the audition process and giving her final say in membership might offer a safety-net for the mission of the program. For instance, in the debate about the admittance of certain members, Evelyn defended their ability to take on the responsibility of the troupe. Returning members might not understand that although certain individuals do not possess all the skills necessary, perhaps the troupe offers the training and/or stability to a young person who is in need of it. As a trusted mentor, Evelyn acquires quite a bit of information from the youth which offers a stronger perspective of personal situations than what is generally known to the others. Therefore, she understands that someone's personal circumstances might benefit from the support True Colors provides. Also, politics or social standing might influence the group to create a certain opinion about an individual and Evelyn acts as a buffer in those instances by looking past whether or not the group thought someone was "weird" or "awkward". But, she ensures that the individual will be able to become a valuable part of the ensemble and not a distraction.

In the end, the group seemed content about the final decisions. However, what happens when Evelyn makes a choice of a member that turns out causing a negative experience for the group? Will they still feel their voice was part of the process?

Creating Safe Space

In my conversation with Henry, he explained that True Colors "is an environment built on trust. From the moment we start rehearsal, we talk openly about ourselves and our lives. We do this without fear of judgment or our words getting out" (Thompson Personal). Part of the

design of the troupe is that it incorporates personal storytelling into the devising process and in order to create a sustainable ensemble, it quickly develops an environment where ideas, thoughts, opinions, and emotions can be expressed without repercussions. There are several techniques used to facilitate this group trust and cohesion.

From the beginning, Evelyn encouraged youth to define and express themselves as individuals. During the first rehearsal, troupe members and adults introduced themselves by stating what name they would like to go by and the pronouns by which to use when referring to them. For instance several youth go by different names than those on legal documents for reasons of personal expression or, sometimes, anonymity. In regards to pronouns, some youth choose to dress in ways that does not “fit” within society’s view of what a particular gender wears or they feel comfortable expressing themselves as a particular gender or sexual orientation. For instance, a youth who is transgendered may identify as female but is biologically a male or a perhaps they do not identify with a particular gender at all. Also youth like Niko, who identify as genderqueer, prefer what is known as the neutral pronoun ze instead of he or she and hir instead of his and her. Evelyn explained to me “by articulating their pronoun preference to the group, they are able to express and clarify who they are and how they prefer to identify” (Francis Personal).

At the start of each rehearsal the troupe formed a circle and participated in a group check-in. This required each member, as well the adults or guests, to take a moment to offer a personal highpoint and a low-point of their day. As a result, the group focused on one another and they began the sharing process, which, as Evelyn states, “provides an opportunity to observe the

personal state of each individual and the group as whole” (Francis Personal). If an individual entered the space with a difficult situation, like an argument with a parent or financial issues, she pulled them aside at some point in rehearsal to discuss the situation and talked about whether or not they were able to participate for the evening.

Many times, youth mentioned something in particular because they wanted to talk about it with their peers and perhaps use the situation in the devising work later on. On a few occasions some of the youth created poems and artwork as part of revealing their current situations and/or emotions. Evelyn allowed the youth to take the couple of minutes to share these pieces as part of their check-in. In my interview with Troy, he explained to me that he appreciated this check-in time because “there are people around your age to talk to and hear from and relate to. They’re going through many of the same things so it becomes a supportive environment” (Troy Personal). However, Evelyn reiterated to me that True Colors is not a clinical therapy session, so when something arises that seems beyond a youth’s ability to handle on their own or her expertise; she uses the troupe’s access to social service resources to guide them.

From the beginning, check-ins consisted of personal statements and events. Topics ranged from partying to homelessness, new boyfriends or girlfriends and heartbreak, to new cell-phones or problems with parents or school, new and returning troupe members alike, shared their voice with the room. Going around the circle, they each took their moment to let it all out, good or bad. Not everyone discussed openly but Evelyn encouraged all to share something. While the group listened to their peers Evelyn, Henry, and I participated in the exercise along with them.

We played the role as mentors and listeners while also keeping the group on task and within the time limit set for this activity.

For the first few rehearsals, after check-in the youth played several ensemble and “getting to know you” games to help continue the creation of safe-space and foster basic theatre skills. Evelyn facilitated activities such as Michael Rohd’s entitled “Minefield” and “Trust Falls” which break down physical and social barriers and heighten the senses to be able to start theatrical work. She also introduced Games like Viola Spolin’s “Zip-zap-zop” and “Who Started the Motion” that push participants to collaborate in order to successfully “play” the game. The youth, especially the returning members, often requested specific games that they enjoyed.

One of the games the troupe played in the first few days involved the youth and adults selecting three small slips of paper. Our instructions were to write an interesting, personal fact on each. TC collected everyone’s papers and placed them in a hat. Everyone took turns pulling and reading one paper aloud to the group and everyone placed a hand on the person they believed wrote that statement. Once everyone chose a person, the identity of the true author of the paper raised their hand. Many of the statements expressed favorite colors, music, or clothing designers but also included proclamations about LGBTQ identity and/or glimpses into personal situations. For example, Becky, a new troupe member who enjoys dressing in bright, quirky clothing, revealed having a mild form of Asperger’s Syndrome; a disorder that can make social interaction challenging. Some of the troupe looked at her with a questioning look while others smiled and patted her on the back. She would later make this same statement in a monologue within the

production. On the other hand, Ricky eagerly wrote down his recent adoption by a gay couple. This instigated applause from his peers.

Throughout the night we continued to play similar games. The returning troupe members eagerly asked to lead an activity and often Evelyn obliged. Most of the youth caught on quickly and the newer members matched the high energy of the veterans. Eventually the group began to talk to one another in a way that could make it difficult for a person entering the room for the first time to distinguish the returning from the new troupe members.

A few rehearsals later, I introduced an exercise called, “Trust Circle.” My variation of this ensemble builder asks the group to closely form a circle holding their hands at chest height. A volunteer enters the center, crosses his/her arms over the chest, closes the eyes, straightens the legs and torso, and gives weight over to the group of hands who gently passes them around the circle without speaking. This helps to promote teamwork and trust by pushing the group to work together to ensure the safety of their peer.

During the facilitation of the activity I asked for volunteers to come forward. One or two raised their hands. From previous experience I knew that those new to this exercise become hesitant about allowing others to take over their weight. It also sometimes instigates laughter and a lack of gentleness while moving the volunteer around the circle. Both of these reactions presented themselves in particular session. However, from the start of the exercise, the group was less talkative and more physically rigid than in previous games. Some of those that usually volunteered remained silent. Troy, who ended up volunteering, slowly entered the center and did not allow himself to concentrate on the exercise and resisted the transfer of weight to his peers.

From my perspective, the troupe shifted from a level of openness in the “getting to know you” exercise to closing themselves off and making excuses as to why they couldn’t participate in the trust circle. That being said, some of the youth eventually released their tensions with the exercise and fully committed to the task at hand.

After the first three or so rehearsals the ensemble building games transitioned into writing exercises, activities covering the basics of theatre (stage positions, acting terms, etc.), and structured improvisation games. The following chapters will talk more about this phase but throughout the troupe the youth continued with group check-ins and warm-up activities similar to the ones conducted in the beginning phases.

Reflection

The activities used to create a safe environment for the troupe to open up about themselves and develop an ensemble, continually draw on the youth-centered approach for guidance and structure. This approach effects both the strategies used to implement the exercises and their outcomes.

From the outset, allowing the youth to proclaim their individuality by giving them the floor to announce their name and pronoun preference empowered them to take control of their identity within this group. As I mentioned before some of the youth did not use their socially “assigned” name or pronoun in the troupe. Sometimes the youth do not proclaim their sexual orientation or gender identity to their parents, school, or even themselves for reasons including ridicule or unwillingness to “confuse” society. On the other hand, some are “out and proud”

about who they are to everyone. True Colors allows them the space to be themselves whether or not they are outside of the troupe. As a result, sometimes the confidence they build inside the troupe allows them to become more open to others outside. This very fact came forth in my conversation with Henry. He states:

When I was in High School it was a different climate than right now. Back then I identified as Lesbian and my girlfriend and I were the only out gay couple in school. The week I began the troupe, I came out as Transgendered. I came out and started to go by Henry and male pronouns. This made me feel like I was finally part of the community because I could define and be the ‘right’ letter in LGBTQ. Evelyn was immediately supportive and helped create that space where I could be Henry. I still identified as female during my day job. True Colors was a safe space I could go and figure out who I was. (Thompson Personal)

By developing an atmosphere where youth explore personal identity without judgment, True Colors immediately establishes a unique space. This is important because as I mentioned Chapter 3, LGBTQ youth face numerous social pressures at home and at school, especially if they are not supportive environments. For example, some of the youth do not reveal their sexual orientations to family/friends and put on alternate personas. True Colors is important because, as Jean Baker, states “a positive sense of personal identity for the adolescent, gay or straight must incorporate sexual identity” (Baker 42). She makes the argument that because of social stigma, LGBTQ youth are often deprived of supports for healthy sexual developments like peers to with which to share sexual concerns or attractions or a positive gay adult in their life which helps to

create a positive personal identity (42). Therefore, True Colors helps to fill that necessary void in order to develop personal and social identity.

True Colors offers that space where the youth have more empowerment determining their self identity and receive support from both adults and peers. Additionally, the youth are not forced to pigeon-hole themselves into a particular category. There is a joke within the troupe that LGBTQ could expand to include any letter of the alphabet in order to accommodate an individual's particular identity. Furthermore, neither Evelyn nor other troupe members place limits or regulations on types of, additions to, or changes to anyone's identity. Having this sort of environment in True Colors opens the youth up from the very beginning making them more willing to share themselves, form an ensemble, and in theory, assist in developing a creative atmosphere. Youth like Niko do not have any qualms expressing their identity and explaining the uniqueness of it to anyone who is willing to listen. Evelyn expressed to me that sometimes a "youth will talk about a new orientation that they identify as or change their orientation. As an adult she doesn't judge, lecture, or encourage because it is the youth's space to be who they are and not what others tell them to be" (Francis Personal). However, would the youth be so open if they were not empowered to assert their own identity? What would happen if Evelyn placed parameters on or forced the youth to pick an orientation or identity?

This youth empowerment and identity formation continues in the check-in exercise. Every member of the troupe received a moment in the beginning of rehearsal to state what's on their mind without limitations but with a structure (a high and a low) that's efficient in focusing and preparing the group. Again, the troupe received opportunities to discuss, anguish about, or

even, celebrate personal situations that might cause backlash if mentioned in other places. Their candor and willingness to share speaks to the sense of comfort they feel and that the room is truly their space. I expected much of the typical stories about where troupe members came from and small glimpses into their past, knowing much of the more personal stories came later. They easily proved me wrong. Of course, there was a splattering of “general” getting to know you statements, but for the most part, they were willing to share extremely deep and powerful experiences. As rehearsals progressed, more and more willingly spoke openly about themselves. For instance, when Becky spoke up about her challenge with Aspergers it was after a few rehearsals with check-ins where others opened up about their lives. I’m uncertain without first seeing others’ willingness to share with the group she would have opened up like she did.

Furthermore, having Evelyn, Henry, and myself sit down and check-in created place where both adult and youth participated and shared. Evelyn, Henry, and I openly talked about our day, significant others, and personal challenges just like the youth. We did this to help demonstrate to the youth that they could trust us because we willingly shared and offered vulnerability. There was not a significant difference in the way they reacted or responded to our sharing than they did to their peers. In essence, it created an even playing-field for both youth and adults to reveal parts of our live and this sense of equality continued into the rehearsal work.

Honestly, I was apprehensive about revealing anything too personal because in my experience, youth workers cautiously set boundaries. Conversely, observing Evelyn and Henry openly share established that it was a safe environment and the line is a little less strict. Of course, we chose to discuss topics keeping in mind the positive and professional role-model lens

that the youth viewed us through. For example, Henry openly discussed frustrating work situations where customers mistook his gender but also celebratory milestones in his physical transition from female to male. I too revealed the emotional toll of living far from family and friends. The youth often offered words of encouragement or support which helped to form a trusting relationship. Evelyn constantly talked about her close and positive relationship with her wife which provided an example of how LGBTQ people can form positive and stable relationships no matter what society says.

Fortunately, Evelyn and Henry, who were experienced and understand the dynamics of the group, guided me as to how open I could be. Another adult trying to facilitate a similar process might find it challenging without the same assistance. The question is, will most youth workers be willing to be so open with youth and, if not, will they be able to create a similar space of open storytelling and trust?

At times, allowing the youth this space to discuss whatever personal issue was on their mind created distractions and brought forth topics not entirely comfortable for everyone. For example, many times the youth enjoy talking about the exploits that filled their weekend. For the most part, these consisted of talking about making new friends or visiting a new place. But in a few cases the check-ins involved discussions about parties and alcohol and behaviors not necessarily supportive of positive youth development. When such discussions occurred many of the youth giggled because of the typically, over-the-top storytelling. On the other hand, some of the youth rolled their eyes in reaction to those types of stories and exclaimed that they set a bad example for the younger members. Sometimes this spurred tension between those youth who felt

this behavior is part of their experience and those who find it degrading to the LGBTQ community. When this occurred, Evelyn tried to steer the conversation into other aspects of the story or move to a different troupe member to share.

However, everyone who enters True Colors understands that check-in is a free space to speak. Therefore, it becomes a challenge for adults to terminate their conversation and allow the youth to discuss freely. It is important for the adults to understand that the topics that come up in check-in are often real issues for the youth. To deny they exist would ignore important facets of the LGBTQ youth community. As a result Evelyn walked a fine line between creating a positive environment for everyone and allowing speech that reflects the lives of the young people. In this particular troupe, Evelyn used any tension created by the check-ins to encourage a formal conversation, which, as I will discuss in the next chapter, led to a scene in the final production dealing with the influence of alcohol on the lives of young people.

One easy, yet effective way True Colors fosters youth empowerment through this point in the process is by allowing peer-leaders and other returning troupe members to lead the activities. Sometimes Evelyn asked the youth in advance to prepare the activity and the youth took the reins from her and started the exercise within the moment. Most of the returning members did not hesitate to lead the group and, once they felt comfortable new members wanted to take on responsibility. In fact, Troy and Ricky continually requested leading the exercise even if they were not completely sure what to do.

This facet is extremely important to them because they often mention the lack of opportunity to take charge in professional situations but it also forces them to really know and

understand the exercise to be able to teach it to others. For instance, Maggie mentioned in her interview: “her leadership and theatre skills are stronger because of the troupe. She used to be closed off and always a follower. After leading once or twice feels like she can take charge and make things flow the way they are supposed to” (Maggie Personal).

Additionally, having a peer share in the facilitation of an exercise with Evelyn might symbolize to the youth that the troupe is entrusted to them and it breaks down some of the formalities that might be in place if only an adult guided them. For instance, the youth instantly felt comfortable joking and creating rapport with the leaders and returning troupe members. This may be a credit of the leaders’ welcoming attitude but also the mere fact that they are peers. Perhaps this is why some of the youth took the approach that they could just step in and lead? On the other hand, sometimes the informal nature of the peer-leadership relationship with the troupe caused unnecessary conversation and distractions from the work. This sometimes took too much time from rehearsal and caused Evelyn to take over the activity.

Alternatively, the trust-circle exercise that I facilitated created a guarded atmosphere for the youth that was not present in previous exercises. Part of this might be a result of learning an unfamiliar exercise that involves physical contact while much of the other activities relied on writing, verbal, and visual communication and collaboration. Although not all of the youth were returning members, most of them recognized the consistent exercises and maybe felt comfortable with them because they knew what to expect. However, some of the reaction might also be a response to having a new adult trying to lead the group. Evelyn established the trust rather quickly and already had a relationship with returning members. The troupe did not know I was

going to lead the exercise. Perhaps if given notice that I was leading or a chance to decide what kind of activity I should facilitate, they might have opened up quicker. Nevertheless, the exercise achieved its primary goals by encouraging the youth to work as an ensemble and build trust that they could pass around one of their peers. As a result, I established my role as a contributing voice of the troupe because they gathered the virtues and merriment of the activity, and as a result, I gained their trust. As I continued to facilitate exercises throughout the fall, the youth seemed less resistant to me and openly requested that I participate in leading activities.

Conclusion

The early steps True Colors uses to establish a setting where youth feel safe and empowered to find their own voice and form a creative ensemble are not necessarily foreign to the techniques used in other classrooms or rehearsals. Fostering a place where youth feel comfortable and open will provide a stronger foundation for themselves and the work they create. True Colors takes these concepts and applies them to its very specific demographic by melding them with the needs and goals of the youth and their community. As a result, the youth demonstrated with each rehearsal that felt more comfortable expressing themselves around each other and sharing personal stories and experiences. Furthermore, Evelyn observes and listens carefully to the troupe and constantly communicates her goals. She finds or retools methods with the assistance of the youth so that they are able to reach a final product but also learn from process. Through as many means possible the troupe establishes a sense of equality for adults and youth. Sometimes giving so much power and freedom to the youth makes it harder to move

faster because of factors ranging from personal situations to general disinterest in an activity. However, establishing this space from the very beginning makes it easier to collaborate and begin to create something they can share with the outside world.

CHAPTER SIX: CREATING THE PRODUCTION

As it transitioned into the play creation phase, True Colors' goal continued towards the development of the relationships and atmosphere established by the ensemble building techniques. Through the practice of personal writing, improvisation, acting, and scene devising the youth worked together to form a production. In this phase the exercises and rehearsal goals narrowed their focus towards creating the final product. Throughout this process I continued to identify the balance between tools used to empower youth and the structures established by the adults to facilitate the mounting of a touring show.

Personal Writing

True Color's script devising process began with contributions of personal stories by the troupe members. These appeared in two forms: through writing prompts given to the youth during rehearsal or writing they complete during their free time away from the troupe. For instance, some of the returning troupe members created monologues weeks before rehearsals began.

The first few weeks Evelyn provided writing prompts at the beginning of rehearsal. The first few occurrences eased them into the process and eventually moved to pieces that would inspire scene-work. Using a timer, Evelyn provided a specific period for the youth to write in a supplied journal. She encouraged them to keep the pen on the paper even if nothing specific came to mind. In several rehearsals, this requirement elicited several comments or moans,

especially from returning troupe members but, in the end, everyone wrote something on their papers.

Evelyn selected prompts in order to discuss certain topics. They varied from asking the youth to continue sentences starting with “I am” to responses to the questions like “what do drugs and alcohol mean to my community” or “what would you do if LGBTQ people could no longer congregate publically?” However, the youth chose the format in which to cover a topic (i.e. poem, dramatic dialogue, monologue, journal entry, etc.) without any regulation of length or specific content. In essence, the objective is to elicit a first-response to the statement provided. For instance, on the evening Evelyn provided the “I am” prompt Troy took the opportunity to create a rap that continually repeated the words “I am”. It included statements like “I am fierce,” or “I am who I am and it doesn’t matter what others think.” He recited his rap loudly and moved about the space getting in the faces of his peers.

On the other hand, Manuel wrote a short introspective monologue about how the world sees him. In a mellow tone, he brought up subjects like being made fun of in school for the way he carried himself. If they wanted, at the end of the writing period Evelyn encouraged everyone to share with the group. Typically, the troupe sat in a circle and each member received a turn to read aloud. Sometimes there is time for comments but no matter what, everyone sat and listened to each other’s work.

After each the reading of both Troy’s and Manuel’s pieces the group demonstrated signs of support for each of the youth. For example, when Troy concluded his rap, he was flushed in the face and seemed as if fury that he felt for his words didn’t stop with the end of the piece.

Once the group applauded, he took a deep breath and smiled and his face turned its regular color. Some of the youth told him to continue to work on the rap because it obviously meant a lot to him. Conversely, after Manuel's piece, he stood silently for a moment as the group applauded and went to take his seat. As he did a few troupe members put their arms around him and gave him a hug. This brought a slight smile to his face. Then the youth discussed how the troupe needed to continue to write these personal pieces because it let them get a lot of problems off their mind and they could be incorporated as powerful elements in the final script.

Any writing outside of the rehearsal took place in the form of individual pieces written to discuss specific topics or personal events. Because the final performance typically comprises itself of an assortment of scenes and monologues connected by a specific theme, the youth know that there is space to include individual work. For instance, from the beginning of the fall Maggie continually talked about the piece she worked on based on a dream and insisted that she share it with the rest of the group. The individual pieces can take shape in a variety of styles and formats including poems and monologues. Several youth submitted their pieces for consideration and worked one-on-one with Evelyn to shape and stage them. It was the youth's responsibility to work on their own and those that are were most prepared and performance ready, eventually made their way into the final piece.

Just as in the check-in and the ensemble building exercises, the youth revealed a lot of personal information through the writing. Though they possessed the option not to share, many did. TC stated in his interview that "the writing sometimes lets you say things that you can't in

other ways” (TC Personal). In fact, he decided to write a personal monologue talking about his HIV positive status and the challenges it creates in finding love.

On the night he presented the piece to his peers, he told them about how over the course of the last two troupes he wrote and re-wrote this piece but lacked the courage to share it. He does not keep his HIV status a secret but he explained that he was afraid about saying this to a wide audience, especially to people that don’t know him. Here is an excerpt from his piece entitled “Tough Love”:

I don’t know who to blame, myself, the other person involved, booze, partying. I don’t know. All I know is that my life will never be the same. I think to myself most nights that I’m probably going to die alone. That I won’t find that one person that will love me for who I am. Now it’s bad to get down on yourself like I do. But it’s something you can’t help when you’re alone, and yearning for someone to love. Dating has changed for me. I have gone from being afraid of making the first move, to being afraid of what people might think. My life is so much harder now, and I wish it can go back to normal. But that is one wish I know will never come true. See most people look at me and think they have me all figured out. They look at me and see a person who lives his life with little to no problems, but that is just a mask I put on. Because deep down inside I yearn for someone to love me, I yearn to be happy, I yearn to be free in a world that forces people to hide who they really are. I want to be all that I dream of being. I want all the love in the world and more. I want the world to know the real me. My

name is TC I'm a dancer, an actor, a good friend, and I'm HIV positive. I guess you weren't expecting that. So yeah, next time you think you have a hard time finding love. Think about what I might have to go through, or what might run through my mind at any given moment. Because, for me, love is a true battlefield.

(True Colors, Not Just a Character)

When he read this aloud he spoke quickly and stumbled through some of his words, but when he made it through he let out a big breath with a smile on his face. His fellow troupe members reflected on the monologue with comments like “wow” and “amazing.” TC quickly made an even bigger smile and sat down with the troupe. Although he still repeated the comment that he wasn't sure if he could present it in front of an audience. Others made statements encouraging him to submit it for the final piece but Evelyn asked the group to move on and that TC would make the final decision.

Reflection

Keeping with the objectives of the youth-centered approach, personal writing provided an opportunity for the youth to have the initial impact on the outcome of the final performance because their work forms the stories, words, and ideas behind the script. Although to some extent the structure was prescribed by Evelyn, troupe members revealed thoughts, feelings, and experiences for everyone to see without edit or fear of retaliation. Providing the guideline that any idea, word, or situation can find its way into the writing and perhaps, the script, opened up the possibilities for all points of view and styles to be included and created a sense of youth-

ownership over the final product. In my interviews with the youth, they consistently point to forming a strong connection to the production and the troupe because their words led the way. For instance, Gloria, a seventeen year old, returning troupe member, said blatantly in her interview with me: “We have a lot of control. Evelyn does have some say but we are the creators of the words and that’s powerful” (Gloria Personal). Furthermore, when I asked Troy how he felt about the idea of performing a published script instead of one written by the troupe he said “it would be difficult for my voice to ring as strong. My talent will shine, but my voice wouldn’t” (Troy Personal). Therefore, the youth understand the impact their words possess in this phase of the script development.

Additionally, personal writing was an effective tool for empowering the youth to convey their point of view and, eventually, devise their own show. It creates a personal zone where the youth are free with their thoughts. By providing the option whether to share or not, the youth wrote about anything they wanted. Not everyone was forthcoming but, often, those who first declined to read aloud eventually shared after listening to their peers’ work. For instance, Gloria, even though she was a troupe veteran, hesitated to share her work even though she often wrote quite a bit. After a few rehearsals she stepped up a bit more and shared what she wrote.

Further, those new to theatre, might find that writing is a common and familiar way to articulate ideas and emotions. This familiarity provides confidence and perhaps a willingness to dig deeper or explore new thoughts in order to contribute to the script. If Evelyn began the devising process with more physical or theatrical exercises, quantity and detail of their personal sharing might not reach the same openness and detail.

From a perspective of mental well-being, personal storytelling assists in strengthening the state of mind because of self-reflection and personal revelation. In her essay entitled “Self Revelatory Performance” from the Interactive and Improvisational Drama anthology Drama Therapist Sheila Rubin explains the benefits of developing personal stories into dramatic pieces. Although Self Revelatory Performance or Self-Rev is a specific process used by drama therapists where individuals develop personal stories and perform them as short pieces for close friends and family, there are elements that relate to work conducted by True Colors. She explains that “drama can be used to become more aware of their present experience, feel more alive in their bodies, as they re-discover who they are and connect deeply with the powerful creative process within” (Rubin 250). Through the process of Self-Rev people discover that their personal stories “can be touching funny, or sympathy-evoking, and in other ways, partaking in the aesthetics possible in theatre” (250). It also “answers deep needs for the performer to express deep parts of themselves and be witnessed and perhaps healed on a variety of levels” (251). Though the primary goal of True Colors is not to provide therapy for the young people, the process of dramatizing personal and revealing stories generates a therapeutic effect. “Something happens while the actor is standing vulnerably in front of the audience, or as they are revealing what has not been shared before, an occasion of transformation emerges through the ritual of being witnessed by a supportive audience, both the audience and the performer are touched by the depth of strength and hope in the human heart” (258-259).

As a result, there might be a correlation between the youth feeling empowered through the storytelling process and the therapeutic effects it produces. For instance, Troy explained “that

by revealing aspects of your lives to your friends, you understand that many of them are going through the same things which helps to create a supportive and collaborative environment” (Troy Personal). He went on to describe how theatre is therapeutic because it helps him to push through and understand the rest of the hard stuff that is going on his life.

The troupe has helped me to push me even further in the direction to express my feelings and myself. I’m talking about being a LGBTQ person plus the personal things that matter to me. This gives me the chance to really express how I think and feel to friends and audiences who just might not understand me or our community” (Troy Personal).

Nonetheless, not everyone grasped onto the writing process as a tool for self-expression. For instance, Ricky sometimes wrote little in his journal but when it came time to share, he improvised the narrative. He ranted about “voguing” in the middle of the subway car or meeting a cute boy. He stepped up with lots of energy to share his stories without reading anything from the paper.

This begs the question whether or not there are other troupe members who might also find different outlets of expression more appropriate than writing. Though the next step in creating the production utilizes a variety of forms and techniques, perhaps alternating the writing or providing time for other means of responses to a prompt might resonate with all the troupe members.

Also, storytelling leads to revelations of extremely personal information and though True Colors strives to create a safe-space and youth never have to reveal anything they don't want to, there is always a risk of unintended consequences. For instance, perhaps a youth brings up emotions that they are not yet prepared to handle. Although Evelyn has access to resources, they are not present in the room. Also, what happens if a youth describes something very personal and another troupe member discusses it outside of rehearsal? Is there backlash of any sort? That being said, over the course of my time with the troupe none of these variables took place but, in this type of work, there is always the opportunity. However, Evelyn seemed highly aware of the lives and situations the youth are going through because she asked them to check-in and pulled a youth aside whenever she learned of any challenges in their lives. Therefore, teaching artists and facilitators conducting this work must prepare for these instances taking place.

Scene Development

Once they acquired a foundation of perspectives to draw from, the Troupe transitioned into creating characters and scene-work. Using the writing and discussion as inspiration, this next step manifested itself through improvisations and group scene writing. Though they began as pieces used for the purpose of training and experimentation and do not necessarily resemble anything in the final production, the troupe eventually narrowed their focus and formed what became the end product.

Improvisation

True Colors utilized improvisation in two manners: first, as an actor training tool and second as a method of writing the script. Because of the strict time needed to develop the script, there were limited opportunities for actor training. As a result, much of this training coincided with the development of the script. However, before the introduction of improvisation the troupe continued working ensemble building activities including basic physical and vocal warm-up techniques and character and environment creation activities. Through them, the youth began to learn how to construct characters and locales using their bodies without words.

In order to introduce improvisation, Evelyn used several different theater games. For example, one of the games that she began with and the youth continually ask for was “Hitchhiker.” In this activity three youth take the stage with chairs representing the seats in a car. Two of them began as “driver” and “passenger” in random and improvised conversation and the third entered the car with a particular tick, quality, or behavior. The other two actors assumed that tick and the three continue on in conversation until the driver found a reason to leave the car. For example, Brie pretended to be really full of food and entered the scene slowly with an inflated stomach. The other two, Becky and TC followed suit. Throughout the game Evelyn coached the actors by communicating adjustments such as “express the new physical quality through your whole body” or “how does the tick affect your voice.” Usually the youth adjusted their portrayals of the characters to comply with her suggestions.

“Freeze Improvisation” was another popular request. In this game, two youth stood onstage and one began acting as whatever character they wished and began to interact with the

other. The second youth followed along thereby establishing a relationship, action, and location. After a few moments of play, a random volunteer in the audiences yelled “freeze” and the actors stop and held their positions. The youth from the audience rose to the stage and chose one of the actors to replace. That actor sat and the new one began a completely different scene but started in the same position as his/her predecessor. For the most part, True Colors’ youth developed comedic and over-the-top situations and characters. One particular scene between returning members Niko and TC consisted of TC’s character agonizing about the shame of having an oversized left thigh. Like many of these types of scenes the youth laughed out loud and the actors onstage, especially, TC and Ricky, found techniques and tricks to elicit even more laughter from their peers. By the end of the game, most tried to match their energy level. In almost every rehearsal at least one or two youth asked to play this game and many times, we did.

During the exercise, Evelyn again coached the youth; asking them to remember certain acting basics such as clearly defining the character relationships or trying new tactics to reach objectives. Sometimes the youth responded to what she asked and other times they continued on in the same fashion. For example, Ricky developed physically animated characters and impersonations of famous figures. He devoted his body and voice to these characters but didn’t listen or react to the circumstances provided to him by the other actor. When coached to respond more to his partner, he stopped and nodded his head yes and continued his previous actions.

The youth provided a variety of characters and situations for these improvisations with the only limitation being to avoid overtly sexual or violent content. Most of the time the scenarios made little connection to the previous writing exercises. However, on occasion, topics

and events that they discussed in the writing found their way into these activities. For instance, one evening the Troupe wrote about the experiences of individuals who don't conform to wearing clothing of their assigned sex. Manuel wrote about an encounter of being harassed because he wore make-up in school one day. Later on, during one of the improvisation games, this exact situation arose in a scene where a department store make-up artist refused service to gay male customer. The actors portrayed the scenario in a way that the gay male character took revenge on the artist in a way that instigated the audience laugh and cheer.

Once the Troupe familiarized themselves with the fundamentals of improvisation, they shifted into creating longer and more structured improvisations. Instead of developing characters and situations at random, Evelyn guided the youth to build scenes based on specific events or themes. Sometimes these generated out of the writing exercise topic or a specific youth story. For example, after discussion the hypothetical situation that LGBTQ people could no longer congregate publicly, Evelyn asked the troupe to start brainstorming circumstances where this could manifest itself. The youth offered suggestions of specific locales like LGBTQ youth groups, dance-clubs, parades, and rallies and named characters like a group of teen friends and undercover cops. Again, some of the youth echoed specific topics and characters that stemmed from the writing and others thought of something new. Then several volunteers walked to the stage and Evelyn asked the rest of the group to propose a location where the scene could take place as well as character relationships and objectives. Given those parameters, the actors began the scene. Over the course of several scenes the youth created multiple scenarios based on the original prompt.

For instance, one group improvised a previous discussion about LGBTQ youth not being able to congregate in a public park. The youth developed a scenario where police officers harassed and threatened to arrest a group of teenage friends because the law does not allow LGBTQ to appear together in public. In reality, the True Colors youth hang-out in a nearby park where Boston Police officers are not always the friendliest. Therefore the writing, discussion, and hence, the scene prompted retelling of real-life experiences faced by the troupe members.

Following the short presentations, Evelyn and the rest of the Troupe offered feedback and sometimes, adjustments to alter the scene. These included comments about what worked in the improvisation and suggestions to make the scenes stronger. If time, groups replayed the scenes with the alterations and notes in mind.

Group Writing

After the improvised scene-work, True Colors transitioned into developing structured scenes brainstormed and written by the youth. As in the improvised work, much of the inspiration for these scenes translated from the writing prompts and ensuing sharing/discussions. At times, characters and/or scenarios developed in the improvisation exercises carried over into some of the new scenes. Using the skills garnered through the improvisation such as creating setting, character relations, and objectives, the youth split into several groups to write scenes based on the specific topic at hand. Allotting 20 minutes, Evelyn instructed the youth to find their own work space, create scenes incorporating all the youth in the group, and tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Some groups wrote out an entire script, line by line. Others created

an outline and improvise the lines as they stage the scene. Once each group prepared a rough draft or, at least, an outline they developed basic staging so that they may later share their piece with the rest of the troupe. To help facilitate and monitor the youth, Evelyn often asked Henry and me to choose a group to work with and assist as needed.

One rehearsal, I observed and assisted with the creation of a scene about the struggles of being “out” in school that eventually made it into the final script. After a series of discussions at the beginning of the night the troupe decided they wanted to try and incorporate three different topics into one scene. The group I was working with split off and we examined the sheet listing the following topics: uncaring teachers, the struggle of finding LGBTQ relationships, and the inability to be one’s true self. As the peer leader in this group, Maggie took lead of the discussion and asked about possible ideas for setting and scenarios. She assigned Ricky to take notes so the group could come back to them after the brainstorming session. After agreeing to place the scene within a high school, Maggie and several other members of the group began to differ on how to set up the characters and relationships. Some wanted stories about football players coming out of the closet and others wanted one of the teachers to be gay. After a certain point, Brie and several of the youth sat quietly and listened to the others try to speak over each other. After fifteen minutes, only a list of character names appeared on the page. As a result, Maggie made a few decisions without the agreement of the rest of the group. I reminded them that Evelyn set a time limit and that they needed to work together to finish this scene. By the end of the evening they created a script about a young boy being picked on by a former childhood friend. The teacher ignores this but in the end the bully turns out to be gay and falls for the boy.

The first-draft of the scene included all the topics requested by the troupe and they read it aloud to everyone. Afterwards my group sat quietly and did not make eye contact with one another. Because of the lack of time left in rehearsal, the whole troupe didn't receive an opportunity to conduct their ending group circle, so everyone went home for the evening.

The next rehearsal, we broke off into the same groupings and came back to this scene. At first, the group returned with the same facial expressions and silence that ended the last session. Ricky echoed so others' comments by stating that the scene was "too dramatic and depressing" or too "after school special." Brie mentioned not wanting to have anything to do with the scene because the whole group didn't have enough input. I decided to make the suggestion that maybe they should "brainstorm outside of the box." I reminded them that theatre provides an outlet for stories to be told without limitations on the imagination. They didn't react to my statement. So, I reiterated my suggestion by mentioning that they should "try putting some fantasy into it."

Afterwards, they began to brainstorm again. Maggie shouted out "maybe we can use magic." Ricky and Brie quickly spoke up and chimed in with their own ideas. I took notes for them and wrote in the news lines as they altered the script. Over the course of the rehearsal, the group took the framework of the first-draft and they incorporated a "genie" character to assist the young boy protagonist and add comic relief. In the end the script told a similar story as the original and incorporated all the required topics. They quickly staged what they wrote and presented it to the rest of the group, pulling the lines from memory and improvising when they needed since there was only one draft copy. The audience reacted with laughter and offered suggestions of how to make the genie character even stronger.

Though the “Genie Scene” as it was later titled, was only one of several I assisted with, most seemed to follow a similar structure. The troupe created more scenes than what could fit into the 30-40 minute time-frame of the final piece. As I’ll explain later, sometimes they are combined with other scenes and others don’t make it in at all.

Reflection

Asking the Troupe to create the script through improvisation and group writing utilizes the youth’s talents and skills. By obtaining a large amount of influence over this part of the process, their voices resonate through the scenes and characters they create. They are not bound by the words or constructs set on them by someone else but take control of their message and its means of expression. By doing so, the final product becomes much more accurate to their experiences and perspective. For instance, in discussion Niko talked about some of the challenges ze faced when trying on clothes in a public fitting room. Although born biological male, Niko prefers wearing clothes designed for both sexes it sometimes causes “confusion” with certain store clerks. As a result of the discussion the group decided to tackle the issue of public restrooms and fitting rooms. They wrote a scene about a girl who prefers wearing “masculine” looking clothes and when she enters the female fitting rooms in a department store, the manager asks her to leave the premises because she thinks she is a boy. The youth based this on a combination of Niko’s experiences and stories told by other troupe members. The actress cast as the protagonist took creative license with the character and developed similar a persona similar to her own, with a laidback, non-defensive attitude. Instead of getting out of control when

approached by the manager, she points out their error in a calm, collected manner, making the department store seem radical with their decision to assume someone's gender and remove them from the store.

After the group presented the scene the entire troupe talked about how this scene differed from their own experience in such circumstances but also how it resolved the circumstance in a way that displayed the inequality of the situation. For example, Maggie talked about a similar situation in a store that turned into a verbal brawl with management and the youth. Niko discussed that in the experience that ze went through ze "just walked away" and Gloria said that she never allowed herself an opportunity to be in the same situation.

This facet brings Philip Zwerling's point I alluded earlier when I talked about this type of work creating opportunities for youth to brainstorm how to overcome oppression or as Boal labels it a "rehearsal for revolution." As Zwerling states: "the aim is to empower the spect/actors [or in this case, the youth] so that they see themselves as agents of change, first in theatre and then in life" (77). By taking account various stories from similar encounters as Niko, the youth were able to come up with a new solution that avoided getting into trouble or not responding at all. If faced with a similar situation in the future, several mentioned thinking how the character in the scene reacted. Of course, the scene might have been written with the manager providing an apology in the end. But when the youth discussed that possibility they said they didn't want to "spell it out" for the audience but still wanted to make it clear that the store employees were in the wrong.

As tools, improvisation and scene writing are accessible to the youth because they provide them full control of the progression of a scene and character. For instance, if a youth is not ready to tackle a traumatic moment in a character's life, they have the option to move the scene in a different direction. In instances when portraying characters or situations that are too similar to their own, having the control over how to define the characters reaction might help a youth to keep safe, emotional distance. On the other hand, they afford the youth, like TC, the opportunity to take the plunge and reveal something personal and life-altering. By giving the power to create to the youth, True Colors does not limit the possibilities of content.

Furthermore, improvisation also allows youth who are new to acting to focus on what they bring to the process instead of any lack of skills. True Colors markets itself to the entire LGBTQ youth community regardless of theatrical experience and by concentrating on youth abilities, they create an environment where youth feel they can excel. In her book Improvisation for the Theater acclaimed theatre teacher and author Viola Spolin expresses the effectiveness of improvisation to connect with everyone. In her opening chapter she states:

Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. We learn through experience and experiencing. Acting can be taught to the 'average' as well as the 'talented' if the teaching process is oriented towards making theatre so intuitive that they become the students own. (Spolin 1-2)

The spontaneous aspects of improvisation force participants to use their intuition and live in the moment and respond to "right now." She believes in segmenting the process by using games

(theatre exercises) to introduce acting skills such as communicating ideas to the audience and eventually into the complexities of creating character and dialogue. For example, she explains:

Games develop personal techniques necessary for the game itself, through playing. Skills are developed at the very moment a person is having all the fun and excitement playing a game has to offer. Growth will occur without difficulty because the very games they play will aid them. The spontaneous nature forces person freedom to be released, and the total person physically, intellectually, and intuitively, is released. (Spolin 5-6)

Essentially, Spolin believes that improvisation and improvisational games allow individuals, no matter their skill level to “play” and through that process they are able to explore and grow without because they are not forced to think or worry about it. Becky echoed this idea describing that she enjoys “how everything is ‘on your feet’ when it is improvised and you don’t have to decided and stick with something if you don’t like it. We don’t have time to think and argue we just do. Everybody can do it.” (Becky Personal).

However, there are a couple of challenges that True Colors faces with the approach to improvisation and group writing. First, as a tool for training actors, improvisation and scene devising allow the youth to offer their strengths. That being said, the lack of exposure to acting technique forces the youth to rely on what they are comfortable with instead of pushing them further to reach more truthful portrayals. For instance, in one rehearsal developed a scene based one teen standing up against another friend’s abusive partner. When the youth playing the defender stood up to the abuser, they spoke in a low and monotone voice pattern which made the

act of defending come across as a chore rather than a great personal moment. Evelyn gathered the two actors playing the feuding couple, sat them knee to knee and forced them to talk to each other as their characters non-stop, without thinking. Brie, one of the actors began to listen closely and react with instinct to her partner but he continually took pauses and continued the monotone voice pattern. This exercise reminded me of a portion of my experience with the repetition techniques of acting teacher, Sanford Meisner. His system argues that repeating the lines and immediate responses from the other actor forces performers to listen and stop thinking, creating a more truthful performance. Although the exercise used by Evelyn compelled Brie to develop a more believable character, with a formalized system of training, like the Meisner technique, both might eventually reach a more truthful interaction. Of course training will not help everyone become stronger actors but the youth could gain a vocabulary and a systematic progression of growth with a formalized system.

Moreover, offering the youth additional skills could empower them to take greater artistic risks because they might understand the necessary steps to take a performance to the next level. On the other hand, there may be youth that when confronted with actor training, shy away from joining the troupe it seems intimidating. For example, Gloria told me that she “took a leap” auditioning for True Colors. She didn’t know if was the right place for her but, when she first arrived, it wasn’t like what she expected. From the moment she walked in people were not judging and the games didn’t seem intimidating” (Gloria Personal). Jumping into activities like a Meisner exercise might scare away a few of the youth but training could provide the necessary skills.

Therefore, any training should first take on a form that is accessible to youth that are new to theatre. For instance, starting with movement work like Anne Bogart's Viewpoints might establish a working vocabulary so they youth can move into deeper staging and character work. Perhaps even changing the title of "actor training" to an ensemble game or activity might relieve some of the pressure from those who find acting intimidating. Finding a balance of creating a welcoming space for all and also a place where youth are pushed as artists is a challenge, but it is one that will make True Colors even stronger.

Another question I discovered in this point of the process is whether adult intervention takes away from the experience of the youth-centered approach. Of course, there is some level of adult involvement throughout the process but the devising phase seems to be the point where youth lead the most because this is where they form their message. When I worked with the group to create the "Genie Scene" I offered suggestions in the hopes of moving the work forward. My idea became their idea. Maggie quickly grasped onto my suggestion and the rest of the youth ran with it. It also encouraged Brie and a few others who shut down to again take interest in the work. However, in doing so, did my authority influence them to create something they didn't intend or did I simply provide a spark during a time of creative stagnation? Although I did not specifically ask them this question, they continued to ask me for suggestions in later workshop sessions.

I referred back to Linda Lang's article about creative collaboration in which she states that "while the drama teachers must give over creative control to students, they must plan and structure the process very carefully and [manage] how it unfolds for the students" (Lang 57).

Evelyn finds moments when she needs to offer suggestions in order to assist the youth. Once complete with the scenes the youth must share them with Evelyn and the rest of the troupe for feedback. As a result, this is the means in which Evelyn allows for youth to have creative control while also establishing a structure and management of the process. Reflecting back, I feel that my assistance helped provide this structure because they felt stuck and unwilling to work with one another to make decisions. Furthermore, in my interviews with the youth, none of them spoke about adults influencing the devising process. However, does this mean that they see adults as part of the collaborative process or, in the end do they not want to counter the adult ideas?

On a different note, an observation that manifested in this portion of the production process was the interaction of the peer leaders with the rest of the troupe. All peer leaders must be a returning member and therefore encompass the experience of the devising process. Both TC and Maggie corralled the troupe when necessary and typically started the conversations when breaking up into smaller groups. However, like in the instance of the “Genie Scene,” sometimes their ideas and opinions overpowered the suggestions of others. Of course, this provided practice in leadership and they felt empowered enough to make artistic decisions. However, this instigated tension within the group and challenging for work to progress. This might be a result of the fact that some of the youth seemed unclear of the responsibilities of the peer-leaders. As Troy later stated to me: “sometimes we didn’t understand the jobs of the peer leaders” (Troy Personal). Also, the tone of the peer-leaders when giving instructions might cause others to argue or simply disconnect from the group. Perhaps a discussion about the role of peer leaders at the

beginning of the rehearsal process might clarify any confusion and lay the responsibility of selection to the youth. Additionally, more training of the peer-leaders might better prepare them of how to better facilitate in a creative ensemble.

The Week Intensive

Although the first portion of the rehearsal process utilized both improvisation and group writing, a majority of the topics covered and the bulk of the final script formed during a period called The Week Intensive. As I mentioned previously, this week required that troupe members meet every evening Monday thru Saturday instead of the typical Tuesday and Thursday rehearsals. During this time they finalized topics to cover, created a workshop for a sister LGBTQ youth organization, devised a rough draft of the script, and performed a preview on the last day to gather feedback from an invited audience.

Prior to the start of the week, the youth voted on topics they wanted to tackle in this production. Sometimes these were topics already covered in previous writing prompts and others spawned from new discussions. This season the topics included: drugs and alcohol abuse, the challenges of use of public restrooms/changing rooms by gender nonconforming individuals, the 40th anniversary of the Stone Wall Riots, relationship challenges, and schools not providing safe environments for LGBTQ youth. With topics in place, Evelyn asked for volunteers to each pick one to research and manage a discussion. Some of these discussions translated into a new scene or a revamp of a previously shaped scene in order to highlight the new topic.

During the first evening of the week, troupe members shared facts and figures about the various topics. On the second evening the group focused on drugs and alcohol abuse within the community. Although not specifically used in this discussion, Evelyn referred to studies similar to the recently released article by Psychiatrist Michael Marshall that states “LGB youth report higher rates of substance use in adolescence, as well as rates of use that increased faster over time than rates reported by heterosexual youth” (Marshall 6). When told this, some of the youth looked puzzled and others smirked and giggled. They discussed the logical causes such as stress caused by harassment and discrimination. Even though the study did not include Transgendered youth, troupe members echoed the theories of Dr. Marshall stating that “the constant stress associated with this discrimination and inequality is a significant cause of substance abuse” (Marshall 6). Evelyn stated that by tackling this issue the troupe could help stem this reputation of LGBTQ youth by educating their peers in the audience about the dangers of this lifestyle choice.

Many youth articulated that substance abuse could become the most important issue they present in the play. However, others brought up the opinion that drugs “weren’t all bad” and that the troupe should offer a variety of perspectives when telling the story. This idea caused most of the troupe to speak loudly over each other with some stating their favor this idea and others disagreeing. Additionally, Troy and Brie countered Marshall’s theory that substance abuse is a result of “Queer Stress” pointing to extremely stressful situations in their lives that did not produce a reliance on drugs or alcohol. Troy talked about coming from a troubled household since he was little but he never felt the urge to use drugs as a coping mechanism. This caused

even more of the troupe to speak over one another. Some like Gloria and Becky avoided talking about the situation at all. As a result, the discussion, slated as only 1 ½ hours, took the full 3 hour period. Evelyn suggested taking this issue to the Troupe's sister organization, the Boston Alliance of Gay Lesbian Bisexual & Transgender Youth (BAGLY), as part of a planned workshop the following evening. The Troupe agreed.

BAGLY is one of the other LGBTQ youth organizations in Boston and many of the Troupe members frequently attend their events. It is a youth-led, adult supervised resource and community development organization that offers numerous programs for Queer youth. Their events range from support and informational meetings to dances and parties for those 14-22 in hopes of creating a safe-space (BAGLY.org). In partnership with BAGLY, True Colors utilizes them for recruitment, as test audiences for the production, and as a tool to obtain more voices from the LGBTQ youth community at large.

As part of the week intensive, True Colors hosted a student led workshop at one of BAGLY's weekly meetings. Part of the goal was to introduce True Colors to the BAGLY youth and lead a discussion about a particular issue. The troupe hoped to eventually devise scenes based on the discussion. They believed bringing the topic of substance abuse to BAGLY allowed them hear a broader perspective of the issue within the community and perhaps, include those views in the final production.

Evelyn selected Maggie, to lead the discussion and facilitate the workshop. Because she never led a workshop before, I guided her through the steps of creating a lesson plan and acted as a sounding-board for ideas. The night of the event, Evelyn, Henry and I, sat in the audience and

watched as Maggie and the troupe led a group of approximately 40 people through the workshop. When talking about the substance abuse many of the BAGLY youth spoke about similar ideas troupe raised the night before. However, when Maggie asked for volunteers to form groups many sat quietly without raising their hands. TC, Ricky, and Troy went to each person individually to encourage them to participate. Once they formed four groups they received portions of topics mentioned in the discussion. For example, one group worked on a scene revealing the desperate techniques youth use to hide the abuse of illegal substances. Another group devised a scene exposing how sometimes drugs brings people together. Afterwards, the troupe facilitated a follow up discussion about questions raised by the scenes. For instance, someone posed the question about the kind of message a scene that “glorifies marijuana” sends to an audience. Others made comments that it represented a realistic part of their community. The youth took note of this information and concluded the workshop.

The next two days, Evelyn encouraged the troupe to examine the series of devised scenes, written monologues, and discussions topics in order to condense or combine them into rough drafts for a preview performance. They narrowed the selection down to two monologues and three scenes. Although most of the scenes generated from partially staged pieces, some needed re-blocking and shifts in casting due to the large amounts of editing.

The troupe spent the morning on Saturday filling the rehearsal room practicing sections of scenes in different corners and memorizing as many lines as possible. The adults went around the room to assist and in some instances, stage the scenes in order to expedite the progress. For instance, I worked on a scene with a Ricky and Manuel who could not reach a consensus about

blocking choices or whether additional lines needed to be added. Manuel, who recently took over one of the two characters from another troupe member, added his ideas to the previously blocked scene. Ricky, who was cast in this role from the beginning, stopped the action of the scene any time Manuel created any new blocking or character choices. Manuel, who was usually poised and refrained, expressed frustration working with his partner. On the other hand, Ricky explained that Manuel did not have the right to change the work. Since there was little time allotted to rehearse these scenes, I offered alternative ideas in the hopes of alleviating the concerns of both the youth. Manuel stated that most of the changes were due to his lack of memory of how the other actor portrayed the character but also that he had the responsibility to make it his own. Eventually, they listened to what each other had to say, discussed the options, and continued on with their work.

Once the separated groups concluded rehearsing each scene the entire troupe came together to run of the whole piece. Because of the lack of time Evelyn convinced the troupe to leave out one of the scenes for the preview performance in the hopes that it will be included later. Some of the youth agreed because they stated the blocking was not finished and no one had any lines memorized. Maggie, on the other hand, voiced her opinion that cutting the piece would limit certain troupe members' time on stage. In the end, the troupe did not perform that scene.

After quickly pulling together a rough draft of the performance, the youth prepared the playing space and audience seats. While TC and Maggie warmed up the troupe, Evelyn, Henry, and I welcomed the invited families, friends, and The Theater Offensive staff. The performance began with TC leading a curtain speech containing information about the troupe and

performance and then transitioned into presenting their “rough draft.” With two scenes bookending two personal monologues, the performance ran as planned. At times, some of the youth held scripts and walked at the incorrect time or direction but also presented large chunks of fully memorized scenes with smooth blocking transitions. The audience erupted in laughter at points and fell completely silent with eyes focused onstage at others. The later was particularly true during TC’s monologue.

Once the performance concluded, the troupe ended the piece with a talk-back session to allow the audience the opportunity to ask questions and make comments. Although the audience could ask any question they desired, it was completely up to the youth whether or not they wished to answer. Most of the questions consisted of the general process of creating the script and how the youth chose what topics to explore. They also made specific comments about the performance itself. For example many mentioned TC’s candor in discussing personal struggles within a monologue; prompting him to talk about the journey he took in order to perform the piece for an audience. Other comments circled around the structure of the script. Several mentioned the ingenuity of casting two actors to play the same character in a scene showing the two paths of a girl who confronts drinking alcohol. The youth, sometimes overlapping one another, were quick to answer and elaborate on each answer. TC attempted to rein in his fellow troupe members by calling on individuals to answer the questions.

After the allotted 15 minutes for the session concluded, the troupe encouraged the audience to fill in the provided survey forms to ask any unanswered comments. Once the

audience left, the day ended with looks of exhaustion followed by a large group hug and a reminder from Evelyn of the continuing work that they were about to face.

Reflection

Because of the amount of work needed to create a preview performance at the end of the third week of rehearsals, the week intensive utilizes multiple structures administered by both Evelyn and the youth. Each of these feed into different elements of the youth-centered approach. By researching topics, leading discussions, and deciding upon what to include, the youth hone leadership skills and color the tone of what the performance will look like. By allowing Maggie the opportunity to lead peers through a discussion and a workshop, she practiced the qualities needed for future leadership roles both in the troupe and outside. Furthermore, certain techniques were in place to include even more youth perspective and voice than in the previous writing and devising rehearsals.

For instance, deciding on the topics presented in the final piece allows the youth to articulate what is most pertinent and current in their lives. Each of the topics manifested from topical situations the youth were confronting. Although they pulled from research and statistics to begin discussions, they quickly tied those facts to real elements in their lives. Even topics suggested by Evelyn, like the 40th Anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, ignited the fear of discrimination and losing rights. Troy spoke openly about his apprehension of the outcome of the 2008 election and how it might affect their community. Their keen awareness of Stonewall's history and its ramifications inspired a scene that reflected this historical conflict from their

perspective, and in a context that simulated their current experience. They surprised me with the amount of knowledge and connection they possessed of that event because of the gap of time between generations. Perhaps it is because elements of discrimination faced all those years ago by others still surrounds these young people. On the other hand, maybe was a result of the encouragement of True Colors for youth to discover the cause root of the challenges they face. For instance, many of the troupe members did not know the disparity of substance abuse use between heterosexual and LGBTQ communities. The youth took that knowledge and coupled it with their creativity and experiences in the hopes of enlightening their peer audiences.

Also, by presenting a workshop for BAGLY, the troupe invites other LGBTQ youth to help develop the production's message. As much as True Colors comprises a variety of individuals and backgrounds, having a larger base to feed into the devising process develops a three-dimensional reflection of the community they represent. For those individuals at BAGLY who feel unable to voice their perspectives, True Colors acts as a conduit and megaphone to express themselves to the rest of society. Additionally, seeing the True Colors members as leaders and speakers of the youth community in the workshop, BAGLY youth might feel compelled to discover methods to make their voice louder. In fact, many in the troupe joined because of their exposure to True Colors during a visit to BAGLY.

Of course, sometimes the perspectives of the youth are not exactly in line with narrative or message that adults want to project. There were many conversations about how to represent the views of the youth who believe the use of drugs and alcohol as an accepted part of the LGBTQ experience without quelling the goals of those who wanted to change that very

perception. When performing for high schools and other youth organizations, Evelyn wants the youth to represent positive role models. But, the mission of the troupe is to allow the youth to speak about the realities of their experience. As I express in the following section, a scene came from a compromise that examined both sides of the debate so that the audience could decide. This sort of outcome could prove challenging to this and other youth programs but adults mentors should openly discuss and examine the pros and cons of presenting such issues so that the youth retain their voice but the production keeps in line with the overall mission of the organization.

The quick time period of the week intensive creates some challenges in addition to rewards. The pressure produced by this week compels the youth to transition their writing and discussions into stage-work which provides on-the-job training in devising and performing. The lack of time evokes little hesitation which spawns creative measures to finish tasks on time. For instance, much of the writing and staging for the scene about substance abuse came from two group sessions. However, the time crunch produces tension and frustration from the youth new to the process which causes the adults to step in to expedite and alleviate situations. Although Evelyn oversees the direction of the entire piece and it might be efficient for the youth to follow one person's input, it excludes the youth from periods of experimentation with blocking and characterization. Will they learn and grow if they can't try it themselves? It is not uncommon for a director to step in and make decisions when time runs short. However, being such a youth-centered program, does True Colors miss possible opportunities for input and learning with such

quick turnaround? On the other hand, does a slower moving formula focus too much on the process instead of the needs of the final product?

The Week Intensive is one of those areas of the program where the need to produce a product and the goals of a thorough process sometimes clash. However, it is a necessary element that helps complete all the work needed to translate group discussions and personal stories into a dramatic piece. Many of the youth groaned when the week approached because they knew or, at least, heard about the stress it creates. Arguments between youth, like the instance with Manuel and Ricky, popped up all over the place. However, the pressure also forced both the youth and the adults to work together and pick up any slack no matter whose responsibility it was. For example, Brie and Gloria, two of the quietest troupe members, stepped up and worked alongside Evelyn to pull their scene together and take on the lead roles. Also, TC made the soundtrack by himself with only suggestions from Evelyn. It may be true that in certain instances Evelyn, Henry, or I stepped into assist in a situation but, so did the youth. In observation of stressful situations in other theatre program's I witnessed adults micromanaging youth in order to try and control the "chaos." By Evelyn establishing an environment of trust, the youth feel empowered to do more without being asked. Therefore, it reaches the goal of providing the necessary empowering process while also manufacturing a product. I felt more like a collaborator than an adult directing and teaching a youth program.

In the end, the variety of work in this short time frame allowed for a multitude of tasks shared by both the adults and the youth. Time presented many challenges but the youth were able

to experience or, at least, observe how to overcome these obstacles in hopes to prepare them for the work to come.

Finalizing the Text and Staging

With the conclusion of the week intensive and preview performance, the remaining weeks revolved around reshaping and finalizing the text and staging. Although the troupe devised a few more scenes, the majority of their focus rest in the work they formed during week intensive. Sometimes this involved examining the audience reaction to the piece and reworking it if necessary. In other instances, the troupe members started learning their lines from the newly edited copies of the script. With the addition of a working script, the rehearsals took a more traditional shape. Evelyn assumed the role of the primary director taking charge of creating the final shape of the production.

In order to develop the final, written script, True Colors relied on two primary sources: written notation and video documenting. When devising the scenes, sometimes the youth wrote out every line and other times they created short plot summaries. In either case, Evelyn collected all written work to transpose it into an electronic document at a later time. In order to catch details of each scene, including blocking, the troupe recorded all presentations with a digital video recorder. This fall True Colors acquired a videographer and intern, Dan, to conduct all the documentation. However, sometimes this responsibility fell to Henry and me. Starting at the beginning of each scene, the video captured all dialogue and character movement including any improvisation not written down on paper. The video also recorded every presentation of the

scenes, documenting any shifts from version to version. To do this, Dan attended most rehearsals and moved around the room capturing hours of footage with little reaction from the youth while he was taping.

In order to transfer all of the scene work onto a computer and into a written script someone carefully reviews the footage and transposes the text and blocking. This task typically fell to Maggie and TC who, as peer leaders, scheduled hours to use a computer at The Theater Offensive offices in order to write the multiple permutations of each scene into a final script. When the peer leaders arrived at the offices, Evelyn sat them near her desk in order to quickly answer any questions. Listening on earphones, they wrote the scenes as they appeared on tape. As they finished, Evelyn proofread each transcript and followed with a discussion about possible edits. These discussions usually revolved around shortening the script in order to keep it within the required time-frame, but sometimes the conversation shifted to making changes in the plot.

In the case of the substance abuse scene, which the youth entitled “The Split Scene”, Evelyn and TC reviewed the group writing and the video footage of rehearsal and preview performance. After TC transposed the scene they discussed a possible edit of the last section of the piece. As I mentioned before, Brie and Gloria, along with the rest of their group, wrote the lead character “Rachel” to be played by two actors (written as “Rachel One” and “Rachel Two”). The “split” occurs when “Rachel One” decides to turn down the offer of a drink at a party and “Rachel Two” decides to drink the alcoholic beverage. The sketch follows the outcomes of the each of their decisions. In the original version, “Rachel One” keeps the goody girl persona with good grades, a college acceptance letter, and a happy relationship with her girlfriend.

Conversely, “Rachel Two’s” path is just the opposite. However, TC and Evelyn decided to change the final version so that “Rachel One’s” devotion to school and lack of socialization pushes her girlfriend away. Therefore, neither “Rachel” ends up on top.

The next rehearsal, Evelyn distributed the new text to the cast. They read it aloud, and offered feedback. Immediately, Brie and Gloria, along with most of the troupe mentioned that the new ending took the focus off of the benefits of not drinking alcohol or the ability for LGBTQ to maintain healthy relationships. Maggie commented that it was “unfair” to drastically change the script without the full troupe’s input. In defense, Evelyn spoke about the need to sharpen the script without taking precious rehearsal time and the original ending unrealistically tied everything into a “neat little bow.” However, the youth continued to state that the new edits completely changed their script’s intentions. Taking a moment, Evelyn agreed to sit with the original writers and discuss a compromise. For about an hour the group huddled with Evelyn while the rest of the troupe worked on other pieces. In the end, the script morphed into a hybrid of the two versions ending with “Rachel” mending her relationship but still highlighting struggle to balance school and love.

Although, sometimes small edits took place later in the process, after the conclusion of transcribing the video recordings, the youth worked on a single, final document. In total, the script went through 9 drafts with the final version containing three scenes and four personal monologues with a short opening ensemble sequence. This included “The Genie Scene” about school harassment and finding oneself, “The Split Scene” about substance abuse and

relationships, “Str8lenes Closet” encompassing the challenges of gender specific public changing rooms, and monologues from TC, Maggie, Troy, and Becky.

With scripts in hand, the last two weeks the troupe began to refine and solidify all staging and technical elements. Because of the diversity of tour venues and lack of set or wings, Evelyn blocked the actors to remain onstage throughout the production. As a result, she tackled working on the transitions of actors, chairs, and props in order to refrain from distracting the audience. These transitions required numerous hours of rehearsal in order to troubleshoot. Chairs lined each side of the stage facing center. Youth not in a particular scene sat quietly. On the other hand, those considered “offstage” in a scene, stood with their backs away from center to distinguish themselves from those onstage. As needed, actors carried any chairs onto the stage.

In order to rehearse some of the specific details (i.e. characterization, relationship building, and creating realistic blocking) sometimes the troupe split into their various scenes and rehearsed with one of the three adults. In this arrangement, Evelyn provided each group with instructions about specific moments or sections of the scenes to focus on. Once segregated from the rest of the group, the actors started the process by running through the scene in its current state followed by a brainstorming session about how to strengthen the moments mentioned by Evelyn. For my part, I offered a few notes and suggestions but also allowed the youth to articulate ideas about how to shift the scenes. When the brainstorming concluded the youth experimented with two or three of the ideas until they chose their preference. Since it was the group I helped from the beginning, I usually assisted those in “The Genie Scene.” Maggie, in particular asked me to work with her on creating the “Genie” character so that she was funny

without being over the top. Some of the other troupe members tried to convince to become “overly butch” since “Genie” carried a tool-belt but she felt uncomfortable going in that direction. I told her to choose whatever character traits she wanted. She ended up playing the character slightly brassy with sharp-tongued sarcasm.

Anytime various groups completed working on their scenes, the entire group congregated to show Evelyn the alterations and work the entire piece as a whole. Starting at the beginning, including the curtain speech, the youth ran thru the play with Evelyn stopping and working sections of the play as they progressed. Most of the time she offered specific direction for the actors to implement but sometimes some of the youth also voiced their opinions and suggestions. Evelyn listened to every perspective and either integrated them into the scene or explained why, in her opinion, it wouldn’t work.

However, sometimes the youth overlapped each other’s voices and offered multiple and contradictory opinions at the same time. A specific example of this occurred when working the middle section of the “Split Scene.” The beginning of the section opens with a party where several characters offer “Rachel” her first drink. Almost every troupe member appeared onstage in this moment and it involved “Rachel” splitting into her two halves. Evelyn directed everyone besides the two playing the “Rachels” to shift to stage left and freeze in order to indicate a shift from reality. At first, the youth attempted the scene exactly as Evelyn mentioned. Afterwards, TC offered a suggestion to create a sound cue to further highlight the moment. Troy articulated his reservations about music during a speech and that perhaps freezing might be impossible to look real without any sort of lighting effects. Others joined in the conversation and with the

youth talking over one another, Evelyn whistled to silence the troupe. She stated the scene worked as she directed it and they needed to move on in order to finish for the evening.

After a few evenings of similar rehearsals they transitioned into nights of full show run-throughs with basic costumes, props, and sound. Troupe members ran the show at least twice a night followed by notes from Evelyn, Henry, and me. The week before the start of performances, the youth presented the piece in its entirety to Abe which, as Artistic Director, offered him a chance to provide feedback to Evelyn and the youth. That evening several in the cast demonstrated to Abe that they did not completely know their lines. Although the deadline for memorization passed two weeks prior, they continually needed prompting. When the preview finished, Abe congratulated them for their work on the script but added that the pace and energy could not take them to the level the production needed. After his comments, the youth quietly stared at one another. The next rehearsal, everyone was off-book.

Reflection

During the final segment of the rehearsal process, Evelyn's influence held a firmer grip over the troupe. The need to fully stage the production prompted her to retract some of the control yielded to the youth. Nonetheless, True Colors continued to find techniques that offer empowerment to the troupe members.

For example, though only one or two of the youth transcribe the final draft of the script, by filming the rehearsals the troupe has the power to continually alter dialogue and blocking. Many times these new additions become part of the final manuscript. Yes, Evelyn possessed the

power to edit those adjustments but the youth continually “play” and edit until the very end. Furthermore, allowing Maggie and TC the opportunity to work on the script, demonstrated that their judgment and experience as returning troupe members establishes enough trust to afford them this responsibility. This task presented a clear representation that they are personally impacting a production for a professional theatre company.

That being said, there are opportunities for True Colors to refine the editing process to become more youth-centered. For instance, when Evelyn returned with the edited script for “The Split Scene” the youth feedback caused her to rewrite the script and compromise with their suggestions. The original concept behind her edits revolved around the need to create a more realistic ending instead of neatly tying everything up. My conversations with her afterwards suggested that she simply wanted to strengthen the script. These kinds of changes usually emerge from rehearsals but the lack of time compelled her to do it herself. In doing so, she inadvertently circumvented the troupe’s voice in the development process. Maggie echoed this sentiment in her interviewing saying that sometimes “Evelyn needs to sit on her hands and relax and realize that the youth can take more responsibility and not worry that the work won’t be done” (Maggie Personal).

I agree that as teaching artists and directors we want to challenge youth to think about situations in new ways so scenes and characters present multiple perspectives and unpredictable outcomes. As artists, there is a struggle with allowing the youth to keep creative control on a project and but also editing with an artistic eye. After all isn’t a refined production more capable of expressing a message and inspiring the social change they are looking for? But does this

circumvent the will of the youth? In this instance, perhaps an initial conversation with the youth might challenge their thinking and they would have decided to change it. Though this does take time, it might mitigate tensions which will help the overall flow of the process. Also, with further training and/or exposure to a variety of theatrical and playwriting devices, they might require less guidance and come to obtain the ability to craft the script themselves in the first place.

Similarly, directing the final shape of the piece posed obstacles in retaining the high level of youth influence over the process. Fortunately, dividing the troupe into several groups during rehearsals allowed the youth to continue to brainstorm solutions for the staging needs. As a facilitator of one of these groups, I consistently proposed ideas and techniques but with the notion that I was a collaborator and not the director. On many occasions, they presented solutions to blocking and characterization without my assistance. On the other hand, I felt like a resource when youth like Maggie approached me about specific challenges they confronted.

Reed Larson labels such a technique as “providing intermediate structures.” By splitting the group up and dividing responsibilities it helps “youth to stay on track with their work. It creates structures that do not encompass an entire project, but supplies helpful scaffolding that breaks down tasks to manageable levels” (Larson 68). In essence the troupe members are able to compartmentalize the overall project and take ownership of a piece of it without taking on the burden of running a full production. Also, it allows the adults to utilize the strengths of the youth working in teams instead of trying to coordinate all the voices trying to lead at once.

However, once the entire troupe came together to block the show they continued to talk amongst each other and offered alternative ideas. The variety of opinions stymied their progress

because everyone had suggestions for each and every onstage movement. This was especially true coming from the leadership team. Perhaps the transition was too abrupt from a group into a single director format or maybe the connection to the words and characters created a sense of ownership and entitlement to oversee their management. Also, maybe TC and Maggie thought this was the appropriate place to use their power instead pulling Evelyn aside during a break. It is easy to see how adult directors might take this opportunity to rein in power and finish the process because of the time limit. Maybe if Evelyn assigned particular youth, like the peer leaders, to oversee the direction of certain portions of the production this might bridge the gap from group development to the formal rehearsal structure.

Evelyn understands this reality and yields her power as director, but she remains highly aware of the importance of the youth's input and feelings. Although time does not permit her to experiment with every suggestion, she listens to them carefully and considers if they might work. In essence, she attempts to balance her mission to provide the youth their influence over the process with the practicality of mounting a production.

Overall, this last segment of the production work is extremely critical to the success of the tour because it is the point when all ideas fit together. Important decisions about the message, script, blocking, and character emerge from an extremely short period of time. Thus, sometimes a process that relies on group decisions takes a back seat and the pressure requires more adult intervention. Conceivably, this eliminates some of their say in the troupe but it also prepares them for a world where many decisions do not derive from group consensus. In effect, they experience an authentic situation of give and take but in a setting where their perspectives carry

weight. This is important because the youth begin to learn how to work with the adults as partners and not as subordinates. Ultimately, this could empower them to develop similar relationships connections in society.

In fact Larson and her colleagues believe that youth empowerment and development occurs even in adult-led programs. In his study he found a particular adult-led theatre program with youth reporting “learning numerous skills in theatre and communication as well as developing greater confidence in themselves and growth in other domains of social and emotional development” (Larson 64). Therefore, “although the program was adult-driven, [it revealed] that the adults kept the developmental needs of the youth in focus” (65). True Colors follows this model because even though Evelyn assumes more responsibility and control. This is important because it forces the youth to work on their own role instead of the whole troupe in order to strengthen themselves and the ensemble. Also Evelyn understands the overall goal of the True Colors is about empowering the young people. As a result, she places their needs and growth above any other obstacle or situation. For instance, at the end of the rehearsal process she felt the troupe was not confident and ready enough for the first few performances, so she asked the venues to re-book the tour for a later date.

Conclusion

Over the course of a True Colors season, the creation of the production calls on the youth to delve into their experiences and interests in order to develop a theatrical performance. The structure of the final product bases itself in the goals set forth by the youth. In many instances

they control and make quick decisions about how they want to reflect themselves and, as a result, inform and change their community. Although many recognize theatre has the power to shift minds and attitudes, these youth understand the specific purpose and need to share their stories with society. The unambiguous techniques used by Evelyn create an environment where the youth feel empowered to articulate their ideas and collaborate as an entire team, including with adults. There is a delicate balance between their desire to follow the youth-centered model and provide the structure necessary for a piece of theatre. Although, there are opportunities to continue to refine this line, the youth continually offer feedback that they grow from this experience. In the evaluation section of chapter 7, I discuss exactly how True Colors gathers this feedback and measures this growth from the young people.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE TOUR

With a great deal of time and work devoted to cultivating an ensemble and devising and staging an original play, True Colors transitioned its focus to touring the production for the community. Within this period the youth used the skills and ensemble they developed to interact with and share their message with the community.

In order to discuss the tour portion of the troupe, I segmented the act of going on tour and the performances themselves into the next two sections. Obviously both interweave but splitting them allows me to focus in on the process and impact of each.

Going On Tour

Over the course of approximately a month, True Colors visited their scheduled tour venues. In order to coordinate the logistics of moving an entire troupe to a variety of sites, most of the planning occurred through the True Colors' Education staff. The youth did not select or arrange these tour locations but Evelyn opened herself to suggestions from the youth. For instance, some troupe members requested a performance visit to their high schools. Evelyn explained that it could be a possibility for the next troupe but it was too late for the fall. Once the troupe booked a tour, the youth received dates and locations early in the rehearsal process. The week before a show Evelyn handed out information or "go sheets" explaining call times, meet-up points and information about the venue.

Because adults handle the logistics, Evelyn emphasized this time as a period when the youth should honor and hone their professional responsibilities to the troupe. For example, she pointed out the importance of arriving on-time to calls and presenting a professional attitude while the youth travel in the community. Throughout the tour she continually reminded them of these goals.

Unlike the rehearsal portion of the troupe, the schedule of the tour varied greatly depending on where and when the performance took place. Evelyn explained that the “Tuesday and Thursday schedule of the troupe are set in such a way to add stability and consistency to the lives of the young people. However, the tour, with its varying times and dates sometimes poses challenges even though we try to provide plenty of advance notice and limit the tour to two sites a week, usually one far from Boston and one close by ” (Francis Personal).

A typical tour day consisted of the troupe meeting up at an agreed location (usually outside the rehearsal site for a van driving day or a particular public transit station for closer trips). Evelyn scheduled the youth to meet an hour earlier than the departure time. Most of the troupe members arrived earlier than the call time. However, at least one youth per trip arrived after the call time. In this case Evelyn called the youth or assigned Maggie to call to insure they were in transit to the meeting point. Typically the youth in question arrived a few minutes later.

On several occasions the youth didn’t arrive at all. Although the excuses for this varied, many revolved around unintended and last minute conflicts such as school, work, or issues at home. For instance, one day Manuel was told last minute that his professor would not allow him to miss a class. Evelyn tried to reason with the professor but Manuel could not come to the

performance. When this occurred, the remaining youth, with the help of one of the adults, located their scripts and edited out the missing actor, either by reassigning lines or removing them completely. In fact, on a few of the van rides, I assisted the youth in memorizing new lines and talking through new blocking. One day we lost three troupe members to schedule conflicts. Maggie worked with me to figure out who could take each part and where we could cut. In all we cut almost a fifth of the show. When we arrived at the tour site, the troupe quickly rehearsed the altered sections and performed as if it originally written with those edits. Typically, the absent youth returned for the next tour date and the production transitioned back into its original state.

However, in this troupe, True Colors permanently lost four of its cast members, Niko, Brie, Ricky, and another youth during the season. Niko and Ricky left after the tour started. For personal reasons, they decided not to continue. As a result, several youth volunteered to double cast themselves in roles and scheduled new rehearsals to reshape the production. In some cases, they cut and reassigned lines, changed genders of the characters, and removed sections all together. Additionally, a former troupe member acting as a stage assistant took on some of the acting responsibilities. Evelyn facilitated the changes to the production and continued an open dialogue with the youth about their editing suggestions. She also initiated conversations about the remaining youth's commitment to the troupe and their willingness to continue the tour. Through this process, several troupe members expressed their frustration about losing the members but articulated their devotion to the troupe and its mission.

Before the troupe arrived at tour locations, Evelyn encouraged them to follow a certain protocol of decorum. She told them to treat each site as if they were entering a school

environment. For instance, she reminded them to be conscious of using “adult” language, smoking on the premises, wandering hallways, and wearing clothing that is generally considered inappropriate for school. She explained that many of the schools the troupe visits follow certain ground rules and by adapting them to all tour venues, True Colors develops a consistent and professional persona.

With Evelyn’s guidance, when we arrived at a site the youth introduced themselves to the venue contact and proceed to prepare the performance space. Maggie oversaw unpacking the suitcase and setting props and chairs while TC conducted run through of several sections of the play to acclimate the actors to the space. The other youth assisted with whatever task needed to be completed before the beginning of the warm-up. Towards the end of the set-up, Evelyn observed the progress and sometimes offered suggestions to elevate any oversight by the youth. For example, when the troupe performed in a large auditorium, she asked each youth to recite several lines to insure their projection carried throughout the room. Once they completed their tasks, the troupe left the stage and headed for a space to warm-up while the audience entered. By that point Evelyn, Henry, and I ushered in the audience in preparation for the start of the show.

Reflection

The tour provides the face for True Colors and, in effect, The Theater Offensive, to the rest of the community. Its structure allows the youth to experience a professional theatrical work environment without the concern of its many logistics. It provides growth by promoting

responsibility and accountability but also creates possibilities for the youth to make decisions in insuring its professional qualities.

Having the adults make arrangements for the tour makes sense because many of the youth are not part of the troupe when decisions about venues take place. Although Evelyn takes suggestions about possible sites, this portion of the process is out of their hands. Perhaps the formation of a formal system where the youth take part in the decision making would further empower them. Furthermore, wouldn't having the troupe members establish these contacts demonstrate to the community that the troupe is in fact, youth led?

However, several of the youth expressed in their interviews that they did not feel attracted to handling these sorts of responsibilities. For example, Maggie stated "the [current] structure works because we feel we have the control of our message but keeps the burden of logistics off of us. Doing that work would be too much pressure" (Maggie Personal). Additionally, Evelyn listens closely to the youth's suggestions about possible sites and, when in contact with a venue, weighs whether or not a trip is financially feasible and a good fit with the troupe mission and message. She looks closely at whether the production might enlighten a particular audience and if there is enough support to create a safe space for the youth to share the message. In fact, many organizations contact True Colors to request a performance because they feel their students, employees, and/or participants will benefit from what the troupe offers. Even young people call Evelyn to see if True Colors can come to their school or community organization.

The tour itself represents the professional excellence that True Colors endeavors to accomplish. The demanding schedule requires the youth to plan their lives so that the troupe takes a major priority. By establishing high expectations, Evelyn instills the qualities needed to succeed in the professional world but also establishes that each and every individual is necessary to create a successful performance. For some of the members the troupe provides the first experience where they feel needed. As a result, most of the time the youth, especially the veteran members, make certain to keep their peers accountable for their actions. When someone misses a performance day, the youth take charge and band together and make decisions and sacrifices to continue their goal. On the day we lost three actors, Evelyn proposed cancelling a performance but those present insisted on finding a solution so they could perform. In his interview, Manuel responded to this saying that “the troupe forces responsibility and because we know how important it is to change and create a positive image to the community” (Manuel Personal).

With this high demand of responsibility sometimes obstacles arise. This is particularly true when youth drop out of the program. Some of the youth have personal or social forces that pose challenges to their success in the troupe. For example, many face negative circumstances with authority figures such as parents, teachers, or individuals within the foster care system. Many times these situations solve themselves and the youth again focus on the troupe but other times these figures threaten removal. In other instances some youth realize they are not up for the responsibility that True Colors calls for and they leave on their own. On the other hand, sometimes the very nature of a youth-centered process that promotes peer leadership creates tensions within a group because of disagreements in decision making. For instance, Brie

felt at odds with some of the returning members and the peer leadership because she didn't agree with their decision-making skills. Once a youth builds enough dissatisfaction with other troupe members, like in Brie's case, they might disengage from the process and leave the troupe.

Whatever the cause of a member leaving, when it occurred, the troupe worked hard to keep itself and the production together. Evelyn and the youth commented on the disheartening feeling of losing a youth, not only for the amount of work it takes to replace them, but also, the strike against troupe morale and dynamic. Maggie expressed some honesty when she talked about the troupe members who left. She says:

I had a lot of tension with some of the members this troupe. I tried to keep it fun with most but I think those who are younger it is harder to keep that tension away. They have some growing up to do but I know I still have to work on my leadership skills.

However, tension between troupe members was not the leading cause of any dropouts. Drawing direct participation from the community allows for a clearer and more honest representation than if professional actors were to simply interpret the lives of the young people. However, working with youth, especially those in at-risk groups, opens the possibilities for instability and inconsistency because of the multitude of outside circumstances they face and, sometimes, lack of control over their lives. Conversely, the youth who fully commit to the troupe exercise their abilities to think on their feet and find solutions as a team with the full support of the adults. In the end, the product might not be as crisp but the youth gain valuable practice and empowerment through the process.

Performances

For True Colors, the performance provided the outlet for the youth to demonstrate their talents and efforts while connecting to the community they hoped to enlighten and change. Altogether, the fall 2008 tour visited 12 different venues in just over a month ranging from performances at other youth organizations, high school assemblies, and government organizations. However, in order to analyze the youth-centered structure during this phase, I highlighted three particular performances in order to illustrate the diverse nature of the venues and audience reactions.

Performance Sharing

When planning the tour, Evelyn sought out other youth organizations to partner with and share one another's work in hopes of educating all involved about the diversity of the community. Typically, these other groups employed theatre or other performing arts to entertain and promote social change. In any troupe season, there can be several no charge, shared performances. Past collaborations include organizations such as "Shakespeare on the Out", a program through the Actor's Shakespeare Project for young girls on or transitioning from probation and "Know the Law" through the Youth Advocacy Project, a performance based group that educates youth about their rights and responsibilities under the law. On the night of a scheduled collaboration, both True Colors and the partnering group each shared their performance piece with one another. As a result, any subsequent group discussions centered around not only the subject matter that the groups typically covered but also a heavy focus on the

theatrical tools and techniques used to create the performance. In fact, some sessions included short demonstrations or workshops to detail the artistic process of each group. For example, during performance share with another theater company, the youth from the other organization demonstrated to the troupe how they incorporated movement as a tool for storytelling.

By stroke of fortune, the first group of the season to share with True Colors happened to partner with a theatre youth program called City Spotlights that also employed me as a teaching artist. This high school internship through the Citi Performing Arts Center Education Department promotes theatre as a tool for building community engagement and enrichment through youth. Like True Colors, the teen youth in this program devised an original piece based on particular Boston neighborhoods and their connection to themes/issues in their lives. However, unlike True Colors, City Spotlights does not target a specific demographic of teens besides appealing to those interested in the theatre arts. My role with this program mirrored the work I conducted with True Colors. Therefore, the performance sharing provided me a rare opportunity to witness the reaction and hear the feedback of two different groups of youth with whom I work closely.

The evening of the share began with ice-breakers to warm-up the youth and relax the tensions of performing for a group of strangers. We played a familiar getting to know you activity for the True Colors' youth: "The West Wind Blows." This game requires participants to sit in chairs in a circle while one person stands in the middle. The person standing calls out a personal trait (i.e. blue eyes, middle child, etc...) and whoever has that same trait stands and switches seats with another person standing. Because there is one seat less than the total number of people, the last one standing calls out a new trait.

Immediately, the troupe members called out some traits very specific to their LGBTQ community (i.e. “identify as LGBTQ”, “been to the local LGBTQ hang out”, “identify as genderqueer”). Some of the Citi interns rose and changed chairs to acknowledge that they related to the trait but the majority of those exchanging chairs came from True Colors. As the activity progressed fewer LGBTQ specific revelations came from the troupe but when they did, the youth shouted them with little hesitation.

Once the ice-breakers completed, each of the groups presented their performance pieces. True Colors performed their piece first. The youth from City Spotlights giggled and cheered at Maggie performing as the “Genie” but also booed when TC, the teacher, did not defend his gay student against harassment. During Troy’s spoken-word monologue they clapped along to the rap rhythm he created with the poetry. The vocal reactions continued throughout the performance. Similar to the preview week performance, TC’s personal monologue, drew tears from several youth. At this point the vocal reactions continued but at a quieter level. The City Spotlights’ youth rarely gazed away from the stage and offered loud applause when it concluded. When the programs switched, True Colors offered similar reactions to the Citi Interns.

Following the performances both groups gathered in a large circle and provided feedback to one another. Normally, in a True Colors talk-back session, the troupe remains onstage while the audience asks questions from their seat. Instead, during a performance sharing, both groups form a circle to provide mutual feedback. For the most part, comments centered on congratulating one another on the performance and asking questions about script development. Most of the True Color’s members are older and more experienced than the majority of the Citi

youth so much of their specific feedback spoke to encouraging them to continue moving forward in strengthening their characters and script. For instance, TC advised them to continually stay in character no matter what mistakes happen onstage. Conversely, the comments offered to True Colors generated a discussion about their willingness to share personal stories and turning difficult issues into a theatrical piece that teaches people. Many of the youth congratulated True Colors for being so open and brave. In fact, several asked about when they could see the Troupe perform again and how to join. Troy quickly called out dates of future performances and that they should join the True Color's Facebook fan page to keep updated. The two groups ended the session with a communal bow which transitioned into several minutes of chatting between the various teens before everyone left for the evening.

DCF

Of the multiple government organizations True Colors performs for, the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) is one of the most visited by True Colors. The organization provides the primary adoption and foster services for youth in the Commonwealth. Evelyn explains the reasoning behind the consistent visits to various DCF office branches stems from the desire for the department to continually train and educate their employees about the concerns facing LGBTQ youth (Francis Personal). Additionally, a performance for the department provides an opportunity for the troupe members who are in the DCF system an outlet of communication to the individuals who administer their guardianship and the guardianship of other LGBTQ youth in the system. These performances become one of the few times that True Colors presents the production primarily for an adult audience.

During this troupe, True Colors visited two separate DCF branches but one in particular stood out as an example of why they visit this organization. According to Evelyn, one of the administrators of DCF witnessed a performance by the troupe in a previous year and decided to book a tour date to come to the Fall River office. Fall River is about an hour drive south of Boston and was the furthest trip of the season. When the troupe arrived in Fall River the DCF workers welcomed the youth with smiling faces and ushered them into the performance space. Much like other DCF tour sites, the staff placed us in a large conference room to set up a stage and audience seating area using office chairs. Immediately, the youth prepared the space and rehearsed through their blocking in order to rearrange any staging to accommodate the room. For instance, the height of the drop ceiling forced the taller troupe members to change any movement requiring them to stand on a chair. Additionally, during a line-thru TC told them he could not hear the lines from the back of the room. As a result, Evelyn reminded them that although it was intimate space, they needed to continue to project because of the poor acoustics.

Once the youth finished setting chairs and warming up, they sat quietly on either side of the stage and waited for the audience to enter. Many of the employees entered chatting with their co-workers mentioning their lack of knowledge about the content of the performance. Eventually the chairs ran out and the DCF employees either stood in the back or found another empty space to sit. The performance began with a greeting from TC followed by the opening sequence which had to make the shape of a semi-circle instead of the usual straight line of actors. In fact, much of the spacing shifted in order to adapt to the surroundings. The audience watched closely although

those in the back leaned forward to try to catch every word. In all, the presentation proceeded as performed for other venues with giggles at the comedic moments and silence at the more intense.

During the talk back several members of the audience immediately raised their hands with questions and comments. In the high school and performance sharing presentations, sometimes the troupe had to encourage participation in the discussion. This group asked questions about the formation of the troupe and script writing but they also delved into supports the troupe receives from adults and community/peer reaction to the piece. TC and Maggie discussed Evelyn's role in the process as both a theatrical director and a youth worker. In particular, they mentioned how Evelyn plays an active role in the lives of troupe members. They discussed her part in assisting troupe members in securing jobs and college applications to being a supportive listener in times of need. As a result, the audience continued to ask questions about her support and influence in their lives. When talking about Evelyn some of the youth communicated what Troy mentioned to me in his interview that "she's motherly, but not overly motherly. She's funny, serious, supportive, the best director I've ever had" (Troy Personal).

As the questions and comments continued audience members communicated that the performance opened their eyes to incidents the youth face. For example, an audience member pointed out that the "Str8lenes Closet" scene expressed how sometimes adults assume ideas about teens and that judging them by their clothing automatically accuses them of mischief instead of trusting their word. Other comments continued with the theme of adult reactions and assumptions of LGBTQ teens and the discussion eventually transitioned into how DCF workers can better serve this demographic. Troy spoke about his previous experiences with DCF and

explained that many of the workers try to be open minded and accommodating but too often make assumptions about the youth. For example, he mentioned always being asked by department workers whether or not he had a girlfriend. He stated how these comments usually made him feel uncomfortable and unwilling to open up to people he needed to trust. Other troupe members with prior DCF interactions talked about frustrations with not receiving the attention they needed or wanted.

Several of the audience members congratulated the youth for being honest. They stated that the performance provided a unique youth perspective that DCF continually needs to consider because it is more effective than reading studies or statistics. Following the official end of the talk-back several audience members remained to ask more questions of the youth and express to Evelyn their desire to continue to book the troupe at other DCF branches. In the van ride home several of the troupe members communicated their fondness for the performance because so many of the adults that work for the department influence the lives of many in the local LGBTQ youth community. The other DCF performances I observed also produced similar reactions from both audience members and the troupe.

High Schools

Both in size and target demographic, high schools provide the troupe the chance to connect with the most audience members at one time. Selecting a high school to take part in the tour requires several elements to fall into place. Because True Colors asks venues to sponsor performances, schools must allocate funding from their budgets. Sometimes this financial

support comes from monies allocated through the Safe Schools program. Initial contact with a school usually originates from the institution itself through either a teacher/administrator or a student who feels a need for True Colors to share its programming with the student body. In many cases these individuals support or are a part of the school's Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). Though The Theater Offensive markets True Colors to local schools, much of the publicity occurs between word of mouth between school officials and students who attend performances at other venues.

Each school provides different types of circumstances and audience members for the tour. For example, some offer the performance as part of a school-wide assembly during school hours. Others, for various reasons, limit the audience to specific classes or clubs such as the GSA, Drama Club, or academic courses that can use the performance and talk-back as part of their current studies (i.e. sociology or theater class). Some districts require all extracurricular activities, such as theatrical performances, to take place outside of school hours but still allow the use of school facilities. In any case, the majority of the school performances average over 50 audience members with several in this tour filling 300 seat auditoriums. Additionally, the performance spaces vary from school to school. Though most utilize their auditorium, those schools with established theater programs offer assistance in regards to assisting with lights, sound, and offering student technicians to set up for the production.

Of the various schools True Colors visited, one in particular provides a detailed perspective of the troupe's experience in these venues. Newton North High School in Newton Massachusetts was one of the first schools visited by the fall 2008 Troupe. The school, through

its GSA, organized a LGBTQ awareness day which included discussions and activities on issues facing the community. As such, the teen leaders of the GSA program contacted and invited True Colors to perform two shows as part of the day's events.

On the day of the tour, the troupe took a short commuter train ride to Newton and arrived to prepare for the two show day. Representatives from the GSA greeted the troupe members, guided them to the large auditorium, and introduced them to the staff and students that assist with all technical and logistic needs of theatre production. TC accompanied the school's technical director to the booth to prepare the sound and lights while Maggie, with the rest of the troupe, unpacked and organized the props and chairs. In the meantime, Evelyn started talking with the GSA members about the logistics of the two performances and how to coordinate the seating of each audience. They explained that attendance to the performance was optional for the entire student body as long as they received permission from their instructors.

With the technical needs in place, the troupe began to rehearse blocking and spacing because the stage and auditorium. While Evelyn conferred with the GSA representatives, Henry and I prepared the programs, both TC and Maggie took charge of going through a "cue to cue" of each moment of major blocking shifts. From the lobby, I heard Maggie and a few of the troupe members speaking loudly to one another. I moved inside the auditorium to witness them discussing two different strategies of arranging the chairs and Maggie continually getting louder in her instructions. Ricky (who was at this performance before he left the troupe) yelled back and an argument ensued. I looked to Evelyn who turned her attention to the youth but continued her new task of arranging the video camera. After a few minutes, the conversation moved on and so

did the rehearsal. Evelyn directed everyone backstage to quietly warm-up and we closed the curtain to prepare for the show.

A few minutes later, the school bell rang and in clusters, students started to enter the auditorium. Some entered with teachers but most arrived on their own accord. The auditorium filled to about half capacity or approximately 200 students and teachers. There was a large mix of boys and girls with some displaying stickers and/or wrist bands with rainbows or wording describing support for the GSA's sponsored day. After a quick welcome from GSA members, the troupe began the performance. At first, the students laughed at characters and situations that didn't occur in previous performances. For instance, when Ricky's character is called "queenie" by another character, chuckles arose from the audience. Also some of the students talked to one another and/or pulled out their cell-phones and started typing. Once the performance progressed, most of this behavior shifted into the audience actively listening to the performance. The talking didn't subside but it shifted to talking about or responding to the action onstage. During TC's monologue I overheard a young man ask his friend if he believed that TC was really HIV positive because of his age. In the course of "Str8lene's Closet" the audience audibly reacted to the treatment of the queer teen by Manuel and Becky who portrayed a store employee and store manager. They shouted at Manuel when he asked the teen to prove her sexuality to him.

During the talk back, a number of the questions revolved around whether or not the situations depicted in the show represented reality for the troupe members. Several of the True Colors youth explained that much of what they presented in the piece reflected personal experiences but placed in fictional settings. One question in particular dealt with "Str8lenes

Closet” and how a real clothing store can alleviate the situation confronted in the scene. Niko took hold of the microphone and explained that establishing gender neutral changing rooms and not assuming someone’s gender simply by appearance is a start.

Other questions dealt with wanting to know how most audiences react to the performance. TC grabbed the microphone and explained that for the most part audiences know what they are walking into and that the reactions are usually positive or neutral with a few negative comments or questions here and there. For instance, he recounted s story about a previous high school audience member commenting “about the lack of pretty lesbians” in the troupe. On the other hand, one question in particular, delved into whether or not the troupe was accurately representing the LGBTQ community. Becky and Gloria took turns to speak explaining that they don’t claim to represent everyone in the community but instead portray their own experiences highlighting perspectives that others might also experience. At the end, the audience loudly applauded the troupe and many continued onto their next class and/or event.

As is common following the talk backs, several audience members approached the stage and began to talk one on one with troupe members. They offered further congratulations but also sparked conversations about how to become involved in the troupe. One student approached Becky to talk about how they related to one of her characters. In a conversation with Becky afterward, she explained that they had a connection with her monologue dealing with being taking advantage of by friends and not fitting in with any particular group. She said that the monologue expressed what she thought was a unique situation but it gave her strength to see that someone else connected to the experience.

Reflection

The tour performances demonstrate the force of a youth-centered program by allowing the youth to display their talents, continually make decisions, express themselves as individuals and as a group, and spark conversations within the community to promote activism. Although Evelyn structures the tour, performance, and talk-back format, once in a venue, much of the onus is on the youth to deliver their message and provide the face of True Colors and, in many respects, the LGBTQ community. Rarely did the adults on tour with the troupe make any kind of statements or connections to the audience. Furthermore, each of the venues provided different opportunities to educate and activate change by reaching different demographic of audience members that affect the community in different ways.

One of the most obvious elements I witnessed in the youth is their ability to proclaim their individuality and their strong connection to the Troupe and the LGBTQ community no matter where they are. The play and the characters they portray demonstrate this idea but it is furthered in their interaction in talkbacks and workshop sessions. The youth are not afraid to vocalize any opinion or their point of view in rehearsal but in settings where they were not the majority, sometimes they vocalize this even louder. For example, in the opening activities with the Citi Performing Arts Center Performance Sharing Ricky immediately pronounced who his was with candor and without regard to backlash. This might be due to the fact that over the course of rehearsals the troupe became a united bunch dedicated to having their voices heard. Also, the troupe is one of the few opportunities they possess to not fear expressing exactly who they are. Maybe the combination of exercises in personal expression and ensemble building

conducted in the devising and rehearsal process empowered them enough to feel this self-confidence, identity, and camaraderie.

Conversely, sometimes the True Colors youth know exactly how to push boundaries and test how far they can go with comments. Generally, Evelyn encourages the youth to be themselves without making offensive remarks. As a result, the troupe members determine their own image which establishes a unique and authentic picture of LGBTQ youth to the rest of the community. Some audience members might not be prepared for the personal openness of the youth. However, maybe witnessing and interacting with the youth in a realistic way helps to break down stereotypes and misnomers set forth by portions of society.

In a similar sense, having the opportunity to tour to adults who work for DCF establishes a medium to instigate change. Many adults come to see the troupe perform but those at DCF retain power and the authority over the lives of numerous LGBTQ youth. These shows empower the troupe members, particularly those in DCF care, to communicate with and face case workers and policy makers in a new way. In talk-backs the youth discuss frustration and concerns they and their peers face in the system. As I stated earlier, in conversations after these shows the youth state how important they are because they feel successful in conveying their points of view and enlightening the DCF workers.

Furthermore, performances at DCF speak directly to True Colors' mission to change their community. According to a report issued by the civil rights organization, Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, entitled "Youth in the Margins", LGBTQ youth make up a disproportionate number of foster care youth (Sullivan 11). "Because gay, lesbian, and gender-nonconforming

adolescents commonly find themselves disapproved of and overtly rejected by their own families, they are more likely to be forced from their homes to become part of the foster care, runaway, and throwaway populations. Some estimates project that one of every ten to twenty adolescents in care is lesbian or gay” (11). Although the report focuses on national statistics and studies, it highlights the overall issues in the system. In particular, the report highlights the lack of training about or services provided to LGBTQ youth in foster-care. “Most LGBTQ adolescents have been socialized to fear revealing their sexual orientation; unless assured that they will be accepted and protected, many LGBTQ youth in the foster care system will continue to hide this aspect of their identity from the agencies that should provide them support” (11). Massachusetts offers a single LGBTQ youth, group home with limited capacity so the law of statistics suggests many others are in more traditional care environments. These facts establish that foster care systems struggle with caring for LGBTQ youth. As a result, True Colors provides another layer of promoting understanding. Currently, there is not a measure to conclude whether or not True Colors directly impacts change at DCF. However, the comments by staff members detailing their enlightenment and the continual booking of tours by points to the organization’s commitment to awareness and training on the issues facing LGBTQ youth.

There is a correlation between that act of promoting social change and youth empowerment. In studying this aspect, researchers Shawn Ginwright and Taj James point to specifics about how both augment each other and continue to spur individual and community development. Though their research published in their article titled “A Comparison of Youth-Driven and Adult-Driven Youth Programs: Balancing Inputs” primarily focuses on youth

political engagement, their findings translate to the type of work conducted by True Colors because they have similar impacts on the troupe members and the community. The study list several principles in what they term Social Justice Youth Development (SYJD): 1: Promotes systematic social change 2: Encourages collective action 3: Embraces youth culture 4: Makes central identity 5: Analyzes power of social relationships (Ginwright 34-35). These principles produce outcomes advanced by empowering youth to create social change. For example, by embracing youth culture, programs create “authentic engagement” and produce youth run and youth lead organizations (35). Additionally, encouraging collective action provides the “capacity to change personal, community, and social conditions” and “empowerment towards life circumstances and events” (35). In essence by changing the community through methods and conversations generated the youth become empowered and find identity.

Of course, a primary focus of True Colors is to connect with teen peers by demonstrating life from the perspective of LGBTQ young people. The High School tours provide the best opportunity to reach this audience and, at the same time, help promote the goals that Jeff Perrotti advocates to create safe learning environments through the Safe Schools Program. The True Colors members understand the importance and impact work for youth and by youth can have on opinions. For instance, Maggie states in her interview that “if this were an adult program or written by adults, the kids we try to reach wouldn’t pay attention and they wouldn’t connect to us as much. Hearing something coming from your peers makes it sync in more. It has to come from your peers because we understand the environment and live similar lives” (Maggie Personal). This theory takes the troupe’s writing to another level because not only can they feel empowered to share their stories, many feel that only their stories truly make a difference in high school

environments. Also, because the youth create the message, they insert many portions of their culture to communicate to their peers. For example, TC chose all the music for the production which included current music artists such as Lady Gaga and much of the dialogue reflected the youth's current vernacular. This aspect correlates back to Ginwright's point that using aspects of youth culture to promote social change is important in empowering the young people. It also creates an authentic representation of the youth and an aesthetic recognized by their peers. Furthermore, because the youth lead all talk-backs, audiences witness their empowerment and see that the message belongs to the youth and not contrived by adults.

Additionally, many of the troupe members talk openly about the struggles of being part of the LGBTQ community in a high school environment. Many possess experiences of bullying and discrimination from peers and teachers that echo the national statistics I pointed to earlier. However, performing personal stories and proclaiming themselves to high schools all over Massachusetts provides an opportunity to stand up and reflect a mirror to many of those who instigate such oppression. Manuel highlighted this aspect of True Colors when he described how he benefited from the development of a monologue he performed in local high schools:

I was never able to come out in High School but through the troupe, I came out loud and proud at several schools. This helped build my own confidence because I was able to overcome fears I held for a very long time. Of course there is strength in numbers and High Schools are much more receptive to the LGBTQ community than even a few years ago but it was a major relief to let myself open up so much. It was good for the soul. (Manuel Personal)

For some of the youth sometimes the troupe visits a school they currently attend. Whether or not that particular environment is receptive and safe for LGBTQ youth, the ability to perform for familiar faces provides a personal experience that allows teachers and peers to see troupe members in a new light. For instance, perhaps a teacher better understands a troupe member's behavior because they learn about a past struggle that brought that youth to a specific frame of mind. Although this troupe did not include members who are also students at any of our tour venues, one particular school impacted Troy. Before we went to this school, he told me that "we are going to the High School where my brother and sister went and it means a lot to me. It's a pretty bad school for gay people. We have a chance to make a difference. I know they might get something out of it because there is nothing else like it there" (Troy Personal). Of course, sharing personal stories and emotions to their own school contains the possibility of opening up the youth to ridicule and/or harassment. In fact, Evelyn talks frankly with the youth during the audition process about the possibility that the troupe might visit their school and whether they feel comfortable performing at that venue.

The tour and performances not only continually promote youth growth and leadership within the troupe; they also empower youth organizers and audiences at the venues. In many instances, young people instigate the scheduling of True Colors to visit their school or organization. In the example I provided above, I pointed to the GSA officers of Newton North asking the troupe to take part in their LGBTQ Awareness Day. In other cases, sometimes a student hears about or witnesses a True Colors' performance and asks a supportive adult at their school to look into contacting Evelyn to bring the troupe. Either way, Evelyn promotes the

impression that youth may freely and easily contact and interact with True Colors. From another perspective, the troupe performance often spawns questions from LGBTQ audience members about participating in True Colors. Many of those who audition for the troupe often observed a troupe performance in the past. Talk-back questions and post-show conversations with the cast regularly demonstrate curiosity in LGBTQ advocacy and theatre.

Sometimes maintaining balance between efficiency and professionalism in the tour became compromised in an atmosphere where the youth played a major role in controlling the process. Much of this challenge manifested itself in the lack of respect between the youth leadership and the rest of the troupe. Sometimes the youth leaders, as noted in the stop at Newton North, struggled with the pressure of preparing for the performance. This might be attributed to breakdowns in communication about which tasks the leaders were supposed to take charge. Though these distractions occurred, Evelyn often allowed the youth to resolve the situation and finish the work without her intervention. In the end, they pulled together and succeeded, completing the tour.

Overall, the tour represented a culmination of the work put in by the entire troupe. Little by little Evelyn allowed the youth to exhibit their eagerness to take charge and make decisions. As a result audiences witnessed a troupe of young people empowered to create art and make a difference in their lives and their community. Each experience and venue represented something different for each troupe member. Whether they had a personal connection to a particular school or an opportunity to demonstrate a new performing skill to another arts group, the tour provided a variety of experiences and audiences to share their perspective.

Evaluation

True Colors culminated the process with a final public and family performance of the piece and, a few days later, a session of reflection for the youth. Members of the community who could not see the show at a tour venue gathered to celebrate these last performances and share in an awards ceremony for the youth. Following this the focus of the troupe moved towards evaluating the overall process. Through reflection and evaluation by both youth and community, Evelyn gathers these written evaluations to garner a clearer picture of the program.

The primary tool used to measure the troupe member's thoughts and growth in the program was evaluation forms filled out by the adults and the youth. At the beginning of the program, the youth filled out a base self assessment form with questions that pertain to how they measure their artistic and social skills any goals they set for the season. At the end of the program, they filled out a similar evaluation responding to the program's influence on their personal and artistic growth. Additionally, over the course of the tour each troupe member filled out an immediate response form after each show so that they reflect on a particular performance. At the same time, adults filled out a separate staff observation form at the beginning and the end of the troupe to measure personal and artistic growth from their perspective. Evelyn gathered these forms in addition to journal writing, attendance records, and one-on-interviews in order to garner a stronger perspective of youth development and effectiveness of the program.

To illustrate some of the data collected in the self evaluations I inserted Table 2 as a reference. It demonstrates the data collected from the baseline and final self evaluations of the 2008 fall troupe. Although all participants completed the baseline evaluation the data reflects on

those who both finished the troupe from beginning to the end. This table represents overall change in each outcome category but the evaluation breaks down each into specific skill-sets. For instance, under theatre skills youth Evelyn asked the youth to rate their ability to clearly and correctly deliver dialogue or their comfort with staging or directing scenes.

Table 2:

Change in Youth Self Evaluations Fall Troupe 2008

Outcome Category	Baseline*	Final*
Theatre Skills	76.1%	83%
Leadership Skills	62.5%	68.8%
Youth will develop a deeper sense of identity	87.5%	100%
Youth will be able to build supportive relationships with peers and adult mentors. Youth will develop a deeper sense of belonging. Youth will increase their level of participation in the community.	74%	76.6%

Source: The Theater Offensive. Fall 2008 True Colors Youth Self Evaluations. Raw data. The Theater Offensive, Cambridge, MA. 2009.

*Percentage of members rating “pretty good” or “perfect”

In addition to evaluation forms, the youth reflected on the troupe in a feedback session. Evelyn asked me to take the youth into a separate room and sit as the group discussed their

experience over the last few months. This discussion brought forth many opinions and comments and lasted longer than the time allotted. However, a majority related to the leadership structure of the troupe and the high dropout rate for this season. For instance, Troy offered the suggestion of eliminating the peer-leadership program because of the tension it caused between troupe members. However, Gloria talked about establish a democratic vote for leaders so everyone has a say. Manuel offered the opinion that perhaps determining Troupe members' different strengths at the beginning of the troupe and assigning roles/tasks based on that assessment might make things run a little smoother because everyone feels connected to a specific role. After an hour discussion, many landed on the idea that leadership program was an integral part of providing youth empowerment to the program because they have so little opportunity elsewhere.

In regards to the issue of members dropping from the program, many felt that the audition and interview process was too easy and that standards should be set higher. For instance, Troy pointed again to requiring that those who audition must have a prepared performance piece and experience. On the other hand, other Becky argued that auditions might only draw in "theatre geeks" instead of a broader spectrum of the LGBTQ population. This discussion lasted about another 30 minutes. Afterwards, I provided Evelyn with my notes and relayed the finer points of the session over a cup of ice-cream.

In order to gather an even greater assessment of True Colors' impact, Evelyn provided evaluation forms to all audience members and venue presenters in order to gather their impression of the troupe and the performance. These questions range from reactions and constructive criticism of the piece to whether or not the show impacted their view of the LGBTQ

community. Each of these anonymous evaluations became part of a database that The Theater Offensive uses to measure themselves and/or shift the focus on the overall structure and content of a performance piece.

Reflection

Evaluating a theatrical process might lead to subjective conclusions that do not accurately measure impact or growth. However, because True Color's mission moves beyond the art to determine personal and professional development and social activism, the evaluations become necessary. This is especially true in relation to youth empowerment. As a result, the evaluations attempt to determine development beyond artistic growth by examining social interactions and introspective reflection. For instance, it is easy to witness the youth take charge in a situation and apply their own voice and opinions to the troupe. However, the evaluations help to measure whether or not they personally feel confident enough to use and develop their empowerment.

For instance, the data from the self-evaluations in Table 2 suggests an overall increase in each of the outcome categories listed by The Theater Offensive. As a result, according to this data, they reached their primary outcome goals with the youth. When broken down into specific skill-sets, there is a clearer picture of what effect the program has on the youth. For example, in the category of leadership skills 100% of youth "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that because of True Colors, they became stronger leaders. At an increase of 25% from the base to final evaluations 100% stated they can be truthful and stand up for themselves and others even when it is difficult (2008 Youth Self Evaluations). As a result, the youth felt that they are growing in

leadership and self-confidence. This could be a result of the leadership opportunities and/or the empowerment of self-expression through the activities and/or the production.

However, only 50% stated they comfortable leading other youth in forums, discussions, and/or workshops. This maybe a due to the fact that only two of the youth received formal leadership positions and/or training in group facilitation. When Maggie received the opportunity to lead the BAGLY workshop, she came to me for guidance in group facilitation. Perhaps if everyone received similar training they might feel more at ease in this skill. That being said, 88% ranked themselves comfortable staging or directing scenes. Although this might seem to contradict the previous finding, they are separate because they use different leadership formats. For instance, when the youth direct and stage scenes they do so in groups and/or through improvisation many times in rehearsal. This creates a collaborative, low-pressure situation for the youth to explore and learn together. Facilitation of workshops, talkbacks, discussions, etc... add more pressure because many participants are not part of the True Colors “family,” youth sometimes have to lead on their own, and, as I mentioned, the lack of training lowers self-confidence. Though the youth went through a mock talkback before the tour to practice answering questions, maybe more of these with youth taking turns leading could boost this category.

Although the evaluations do not ask the youth to point to what ignited the growth or lack thereof, in my interviews they highlighted the leadership team, ensemble building exercises, and the act of devising a show based on their lives as outlets for development. For instance, Henry, in talking about the importance of creating the script, explained that “the writing process is

important to building a sense of bonding and cohesion with others. It also encourages those who don't think of themselves as actors or activists to stand up for themselves because it empowers them to tell their story and participate" (Thompson Personal).

On the other hand, Gloria spoke about the troupe's ability to assist with her social anxiety through the community it helps to create. She declared that "True Colors made me feel responsible to get life on track to be an active member of the community. The open environment, ensemble building, and Evelyn are great in nurturing youth in ways that they feel supported. They allowed me to take baby steps in order to find a stronger voice and place in the troupe. Otherwise she might be sitting at home on the couch, not connecting with anyone" (Gloria Personal).

These statements relate to the goals set forth in True Color's mission statement and logic model. In particular they point to the objective of "increasing a sense of belonging, identity, responsibility, and social ability" (The Theater Offensive, Logic Model). This means that the program, at least from the acquired data and my handful of interviews, reaches the skill sets it sets forth to develop. Perhaps future evaluations might ask for more specifics about which tools prove to be the most successful at achieving those goals so that they might strengthen future programming.

Conversely, the evaluations and the final troupe discussion allow the youth to impact how the troupe runs in the future. Even though the session doesn't supply quantifiable data, it is a final opportunity for the youth to share their voice by emboldening them to refine the process. Evelyn takes the notes from these sessions and decides how to implement the suggestions into

the next season. The youth speak with candor and passion about their opinions suggesting that they possess a strong personal connection to the success of the troupe.

These evaluation tools relate directly to the youth-centered process because they provide tangible feedback about the program from the youth's perspective and measure whether or not this technique assists in further personal development. It is easy to assume that as the program cultivates leadership, communication, and social skills their confidence increases and they are more willing to take on responsibilities and voice their opinions. For instance, over the course of the troupe, the youth, especially those new to the program, continually spoke up and offered suggestions. Becky, who started off rather quite, ended up taking on more responsibilities and roles in the production after some of the youth dropped. Furthermore, the returning troupe members comfortably took charge and established that True Colors was their own space. TC never seemed unwilling or hesitant about pulling the group together or taking over some of Evelyn's responsibilities such as connecting with tour venue contacts when the troupe arrived. Without evaluations The Theater Offensive might not be able to adjust and improve its structure to serve all the needs of the youth it serves.

The feedback forms filled in by audiences serve the troupe by providing a critical review of the performance and, also a quantitative analysis of the impact of the tour. Although they don't get to examine other troupe member evaluations, the youth enjoy the opportunity to look over the audience reaction forms. Evelyn told the youth not to shift any staging or characterization because of comments by the audience. However, sometimes recurring observations cause the youth to reflect about how to make the show stronger. For instance, the

first few audiences commented on the quick speed of line delivery by several key actors. As a result, Maggie insisted the troupe began to run lines before performances at a slower pace. This helped to correct the quick line deliveries. Also, by seeing the response from the youth understand the portions of their message that come across to audiences. This provided youth with immediate feedback to measure whether or not they reach the goals of enlightening the community that they set forth at the outset of the troupe. When the troupe brainstorms which issues they want to tackle, sometimes Evelyn refers to comments of previous tours in order to inspire the youth.

As True Colors continues to grow and transform Evelyn focuses her attention to new evaluation techniques so The Theater Offensive can measure the impact of its programming. She consistently expresses that this data is necessary to continue to refine the technique but also provide support for the viability of True Colors as an agent of change and a source for youth development. Additionally, she understands that many out of school programs like True Colors occur around the country but they collect little quantitative data in relation to youth development. Phillip Zwerling mentions this fact in his study saying that in his “fieldwork he was repeatedly told that theatre programs teach teens empathy, cooperation, discipline, self-esteem, and provide emotional release but none offered quantifiable evidence of such results” (Zwerling 140). He argues that if politicians and bureaucrats are to be convinced of the merits of these programs, they need this data (141). Evelyn believes True Colors can turn this around with continually developing these evaluation tools.

Conclusion

Touring an original performance allows the youth of True Colors to use their newly acquired skills to share their art and their voice. The fact that they must present a play forces them to make decisions and pull together when obstacles get in the way. The structure and support put in place by Evelyn allows them to connect with their community in unique ways that build bridges to making it safer and stronger. True Colors opens the eyes and minds of both adults and youth, but the program is not afraid to listen to and continually analyze its feedback so that it can grow and change. Furthermore, the tour supplies a great example of the youth-centered technique at work because the troupe members become the face and driving force behind most of the work. They offer audiences a personal and professional production and provide an open forum to discuss their lives and community while also building confidence and artistic craft.

CHAPTER EIGHT: SIMILAR PLAYERS

In order to evaluate True Colors' technique of engaging LGBTQ youth through theatre it is important to inspect the methodology and structure of similar programs. Perhaps aspects of another group could highlight a strength, weakness, or similarity to the True Colors' approach. In interviewing and analyzing these groups I narrow in on the youth's input in the theatrical process, their empowerment, and the input of adult organizers in order to gauge their use of youth-centered practice. There are a handful of programs throughout the United States that offer some sort of theatre programming for LGBTQ youth and new ones continue to materialize every day. I was able to discover at least 8 at the outset of this study. I included the following groups in this study because they represent a variety of structures and demographics, sustained programming for over several years, and they willingly agreed to telephone interviews.

Pride Players

My first introduction to each of these groups materialized from a 2007 article in Theatre for Young Audiences Today written by one of my interviewees, Brian Guehring. The article, "Challenges, Strategies, and Mission: An Interview with Leaders of Queer Youth Theatre," provides an overview of the structure of each program and points out several specifics such as the techniques used, to generating activist audiences, and challenges working in the community (Guehring, Challenges 20-21). As the author of this article and co-director of Omaha, Nebraska based Pride Players, he seemed the natural choice as my first contact.

Pride Players is an LGBTQ theater program through the Omaha Theater Company for Young People serving approximately 20-25 youth ages 14-18. Originally it was conceived as a one year project that turned into a yearly program. The teens are drawn from all over the city and they are not asked if they are GLBT although some come out on their own. The first year only drew in 1 gay male and 8 straight, females.

The first half of each year consists of improvisation training, research, scene development, and ensemble building. The youth research LGBTQ topics that they want to talk about in the current year's production. The second half is dedicated to rehearsal and production of a 75 minute piece made up of scenes and monologues. (Guehring Telephone)

The entire process takes about 6 weeks and culminates in a weekend of 4 performances at their home theater and the possibility of a few tour sites. They typically attract familiar and supportive audiences and the tour reaches GSAs and pre-service/current teachers.

After an overview of the program, I asked Brian what he thought might distinguish Pride Players from similar programs. He responded:

First, we are the only one of these programs housed in a Theatre for Young Audiences Company. Second, we use a lot of humor. It is used in many of the scenes for several reasons: the teens connect well with the humor, the humor is used as a tool for teaching and activism, humor allows the teens to connect with some strong subjects in a safe manner (there are no counselors on staff) and it

helps provide those non-theater geeks an “in” to creating and performing theater.

The depth needed to create something more dramatic is difficult to achieve in the short scenes and the young age of the actors. Also, we receive a positive response from the audience and their laughter helps boost the confidence in the youth.

(Guehring Telephone)

I moved onto discussing the amount of youth influence on the overall structure and process of creating the production with adults. He states that “it is totally youth driven because the process is meant to empower them” (Guehring Telephone). The youth have say about content, inclusion of scenes, and feedback. Several youth act as peer-leaders who help assistant direct the production. In fact, the scripts are not written down and can be changed by the youth in performance. Additionally, although personal stories/experiences arise in the discussion/research phase, they only lay a foundation for the scenes and do not encompass a specific story. However, many times scenes do reflect portions of discussion pieces.

The adults involved with the program assist the youth to “discover and provide tools to express their message” (Guehring Telephone). In essence they act as mentors and collaborators. Once rehearsals begin the adults take on the mode of director(s) and shape the production. But, Brian explains that sometimes the transition from the development/research stage to rehearsal becomes challenging because “the teens lose some of their power. Sometimes there are so many ideas and so little time that it’s hard to control the situation” (Guehring Telephone).

In concluding the interview I asked Brian to assess the youth empowerment through activism ignited by Pride Players. He stated that although it was sometimes challenging to

conduct this type of work and tour in “conservative Nebraska” the program often attracts activist in addition to the theatre “geeks.” As a result, most of the activism comes from the kids themselves and not the production because they tend to perform for safe and friendly audiences.

But the youth become more empowered activists and individuals because they acquire the confidence to talk about these issues. Some started GSAs and approached school boards talking about LGBTQ issues. They also perform for other GSAs and teachers and create scripts for some of them to use in their own schools (Guehring Telephone).

Proud Theater

During my next interview I spoke to three individuals from Proud Theater of Madison, Wisconsin. When I first contacted Brian Wild, the current adult director of the group, he suggested that I also speak to both founders of the program: Sol Kelly-Jones, the youth co-founder and Callen Marty, adult mentor/co-founder. As a result, I spoke to all three of them at once over a teleconference.

Proud Theater is a completely volunteer LGBTQ youth theatre program that is independent from any other parent organization. The impetus for the group occurred when Kelly-Jones was thirteen and she witnessed LGBTQ theatre/activist work conducted by Marty. She explains that “he was doing this work with adults and I contacted him to see would be interested in creating a youth theater group. I thought people my age needed/wanted an outlet for creative

expression” (Proud Theater Telephone). In turn, Marty believed that teenagers had the “maturity” to be treated as adults and he agreed to working with Kelly-Jones.

The duo developed a collaborative troupe and environment where adults and youth impact an entire theatre process as an ensemble. Over the course of ten years the program shifted from support group to an active theatrical process for youth ages 13-19. Wild explains:

Depending on the makeup, the format shifts slightly from year to year but roughly remains the same. Much of the process begins with a heavy reliance on writing and discussion with the content coming directly from the youth. (Proud Theater Telephone)

They create a two-hour performance presented once a year and tour selections to schools, community groups, and various local events (Guehring, Challenges 19).

In regards to the leadership structure Kelly-Jones explains that “it is very democratic.” The program provides the youth many opportunities to take responsibility. She goes on to say:

It’s a fully collaborative process. Adults mentor and guide the youth, providing them with the tools they need. But the teens dictate many of the decisions through leadership roles within the troop. (Proud Theater Telephone)

These leadership roles come in the form of an elected youth artistic committee and final say rests with a Youth Artistic Director who oversees the production. However, Wild explains that “there is always a step of feedback from adults and all the youth on the work and decisions generated through the process” (Proud Theater Telephone). Initially, this structure wasn’t in place so youth

stepped up and the power came from them even when it wasn't named or defined. Kelly-Jones believes "the art helped to define leadership roles."

Furthermore, empowerment and leadership skills develop beyond those with specific roles because the group creates a space where leadership can take on many forms. Wild mentioned an example of a young girl who started out shy and quiet but her insightful feedback garnered her respect, which in turn, built her confidence and interaction with the group. Additionally, Kelly-Jones describes how part of "the empowerment itself stems from the fact that the stories come from the youth. They initiate the process and sharing the story is just as powerful and important as directing" (Proud Theater Telephone).

I shifted the conversation to discussing the reaction of adults to the youth-centered structure. Marty explains that adults do not come to the process as experts wanting to show the youth but instead, as guides. The trio believes that because everyone comes to the table with an interest and passion for art that the collaborative spirit breaks down the normal boundaries between adults and youth. He goes on to explain:

Everyone volunteers their time. As a result, those that are present really want to commit to the work. Furthermore, the youth artistic committee interviews incoming adult mentors to measure whether they fit in with the group's working style. For instance, the adults understand that most scripts stay exactly as the youth wrote the scene. There are very few interventions from adults and if so, usually they pose any criticism as questions. If the youth can artistically defend a choice, it stays. Sometimes adults and youth new to the program are taken back

by the collaborative structure created by the two working together because of the many barriers placed by society (Proud Theater Telephone).

In their closing statements all three spoke about their delight in that fact that Proud Theater uses art to empower people and change the world. As Wild stated:

Our youth engage and are less afraid of their community. Many use the tools they learn here to become leaders in other organizations or go onto college. They also help to ignite activism in their audiences by raising awareness of sensitive issues. If we can empower, inform, or move at least one person, we have done our job.
(Proud Theater Telephone)

QSpeak

For the last interview I turned to A. Beck, founder and director of QSpeak Theatre in Phoenix Arizona. Of the LGBTQ youth theatre programs I examined for this study, QSpeak is the youngest of the three that started as Graduate work conducted by Beck and a collaboration between 1n10 Inc., a local support group center for LGBTQ youth and GLSEN Phoenix. However, Beck explains that the program runs mostly independent of other organizations and theatre groups and she is the primary administrator.

The impetus for the creation of the group was a result of the lack of programming for queer youth in the Phoenix area. I began with holding theater workshops for youth 14-22 across all racial and social demographics. These workshops where

then broken up into semesters with meetings every Saturday for 4-5 hours. We develop about a 45 minute show. I create the scripts from a collection of true stories written by the youth but 90% of the final script is their words. The first half of the workshops consists of process and script development and the second half we rehearse. I write the script with the youth in Dec-Jan and a public performance occurs in May with the opportunity to tour to local schools, workshops, organizations, and conferences. (Beck Telephone)

From the perspective of structure and youth empowerment Beck makes clear that the youth dictate the movement of the process/rehearsals. There is not a rigid schedule because of public transportation issues and most participants are full time students with afterschool jobs. There is no requirement for them to show up. As a result, sometimes the workshops are run “on the fly” depending who shows up, although the rehearsal period tends to be much more structured than the development stage. Beck leaves responsibility in their hands. “If they don’t show up they are the ones who have to correct themselves. The onus is on them and they learn from that experience” (Beck Telephone). However, Beck does not believe in creating a hierarchy. Any youth that wants to step up and take on a certain role/task, does. They conduct group decisions with her guidance and she facilitates and provides the necessary tools. According to Beck other adult artists that worked with QSpeak encounter a positive environment but some find it challenging to relinquish control.

Beck goes on to express that the group, because of the ties to the other organizations, especially 1n10 Inc., contains a strong social-work component. In addition, she describes that

this is a product of the fact that there are no other local organizations filling the social needs of the LGBTQ youth. As a result, sometimes it's challenging for QSpeak to produce a full production because they must commit so much time to the social-work aspect.

I always question how I can sustain this as an artistic endeavor but understand that it is also social work. For instance, the youth want to grow as artists but it is hard to incorporate skill building because of the lack of time. On the other hand, it makes sense to be part of a social work organization because they need the resources. A theater that does this work without the aid of social services might be dangerous. (Beck Telephone)

In my last question I ask Beck to articulate the unique challenges QSpeak offers. Again, she explains the struggle between creating art and furnishing social support but also the fact that she is the sole organizer of the group.

I need help sometimes. Giving the youth power and control makes it easier but sometimes that leaves me sitting alone at a Saturday rehearsal with a book.

Since my interview with Beck and after the majority of the research for this study QSpeak found a new home with a professional theater company in Phoenix. Though the structure and capabilities of a program like this change with such a move, the observations gleaned from its original format continue to provide lessons in the analysis of its youth-centered philosophy.

Reflection

By interviewing the directors of each of these programs and comparing my findings with True Colors, I uncovered several components in each technique that highlight the similarity in their goals. I also uncovered differences that demonstrate how each serves the needs of their surroundings and youth. By looking at both I hope to provide insight to what might become best-practices when creating art and empowering youth in the LGBTQ community.

One of the key similarities of each program is their commitment to empowering LGBTQ youth and their community through youth-centered work. For example each provide youth with opportunities to practice and build leadership skills through contributions to the overall process, devote energy to creating art that allows the voices of the young people to come through scripts and performances, provide safe spaces for open discussion and inclusion of all opinions, and support the youth in their goal of impacting their community. Additionally, they understand the necessity of targeting these specific youth because of the challenging situations and environments some of them face in their everyday lives. As a result, they display an overall commitment to social change in the LGBTQ community. Finally, they each grasp the power of theatre as a tool for discussing pressing issues, creating these safe spaces, bolstering confidence, and educating others.

In fact, the artistic progressions of each program follow a parallel sequence: ensemble building, group discussion, research, writing, rehearsal, and performance. Does this suggest this basic format is successful at materializing this type of work? On the other hand, do other

alternate formats exist? Could the similarities simply attribute themselves to the use of the techniques of similar directors, teachers and practitioners (i.e. Boal, Rohd)?

The similarities provide clear-cut clues about the foundation of developing and maintaining the process of these types of programs. However, the differences supply a spectrum of practices that attempt to reach similar goals. Some of these differences display themselves in the hierarchal structures of the groups, the involvement and interaction of adults, and, to some degree, the philosophy of how to approach sensitive issues with young people. Each of these reveals varying interpretations and degrees of youth-centered work.

For example, a unique element that Guehring mentioned about Pride Players is their use of humor to tackle the issues. Of the four groups, this was the only one to use a specific theatrical style to approach creating work. Devices such as comedic improvisation and/or sketch comedy are signature elements in the group. Guehring explains this is a result of the challenge of approaching some of these subjects with young people without support of a social service. In effect, the humor acts as a safety net. Also, he mentions that part of the use of humor is due to the lack of acting training needed for the young people to authentically portray dramatic moments. That being said does the requirement of using humor somehow limit the voice of the youth? Would allowing the youth to express a serious moment from their life offer even more empowerment or personal catharsis?

The way in which the programs translate sensitive issues to the stage changes with each group. However, all mention the need to develop stories and characters that the youth feel comfortable interpreting. They discuss the power of creating characters that allow youth to

personally distance themselves from a situation or an event. Sometimes another youth plays a character that represents the story of a peer. On the other hand some of the groups feel it important for young people to perform personal stories. For instance, Manuel from True Colors expressed a sense of empowerment and release when he performed a personal monologue to a school about being picked on. The question is whether or not he might feel the same way if someone else performed it.

Practices vary in dealing with emotional and personal issues that arise. For instance, QSpeak provides direct links to a social service provider and True Colors connects youth in need of services to appropriate resources. All of the programs rely on the resources of a strong ensemble for support and guidance. As result, youth receive a space where they furnish a shoulder to lean on and one to rest their head when things go sour in their own lives. However, does the lack of an emotional buffer or counselor on hand cause any harm? In my experience with True Colors, situations didn't arise that couldn't work out through group discussion or small interventions by Evelyn. Is this a result of experienced, adult mentors that have a heightened awareness of the needs of their youth? After all, none, except in some instances with QSpeak, define themselves as social work.

One reason why Pride Players uses a unique format might be because it does not target youth over 18 like the other groups. Perhaps they assemble a younger company of youth than the others and the combination of inexperience and sensitivity to the subject matter requires this buffer. Also, they are the only one of the programs linked to a theater for young audiences and

Guehring mentioned previous challenges of balancing the perception of a larger, and conceivably more conservative, audience and community with the goals of Pride Players.

Alternatively, Guehring discusses the positive reaction to the humor by Pride Players' audiences and the connection they make to young people. In fact, my observation of True Colors reveals that some of the most memorable moments of the tour pointed out by youth audiences contained humor. Beyond providing a lighter format to approach tough subjects, maybe the comedy efficiently educates audiences about LGBTQ community. For instance, perhaps a skeptical high school student might be more willing to watch and clearly understand the hypocrisy of school teacher who verbally abuses his gay students because of the over-the-top and foolish behavior by a character on stage. In return, the youth on stage might also gain confidence through the positive laughter response of the audience.

One of the fundamental components of youth-centered work is the amount of influence young people possess on the decision making and guidance of the overall process. Each of the programs use the theatrical roles (i.e. director, stage manager, cast) as foundations to their structures but find individual approaches to institute responsibility. All four provide a range in which youth obtain control of the process. For example, Proud Theater represents a strong opportunity for leadership because the final say in production rests in an elected youth artistic director. Also, the youth artistic committee interviews each adult that collaborates with the group. The amount of youth control reflects the philosophy of the group that adults treat the young people as equals. From Kelly-Jones's perspective as a participant and leader she states that she always felt "supported, trusted, and empowered" by the adults (Proud Theater

Telephone). With a structure that depends on such participant involvement, it is in essence, a youth run organization with adults who collaborate and provide guidance. This leads me to wonder if this represents a true model of a youth-centered organization. Do youth obtain the most empowerment with this sort of structure and philosophy?

Pride Players and True Colors implement leadership roles slightly differently. They both create positions for youth that strongly influence decisions but final authority remains with an adult director. These two programs formulate these leadership positions more like apprenticeships where the youth receive training and practice but ultimately they are part of the ensemble. Furthermore, in the case of True Colors, Evelyn interviews and selects peer-leaders. Through her knowledge and experience of the troupe, she selects the youth that she finds as the most ready and capable. During the rehearsal process adults in both True Colors and Pride Players tighten the reins so that there is one voice creating the final shape of the production. However, does this format limit youth empowerment? Would the youth learn more if they were forced to make all decisions with less adult intervention? On the other hand does the adult influence provide stability and continuity with a demographic of youth that sometimes struggle with outside influences? Furthermore, because theatre is an art-form will youth perfect their own craft by first witnessing experienced directors and teachers? Does this generate a stronger piece of art and therefore a clearer message to the audience?

Examining the QSpeak model reveals no formal hierarchy. For instance, the youth in the program step-up and take a leadership role when and if they want. Ultimately, they obtain the freedom to choose whether or not to see the production come to fruition. Not that the other

groups don't depend on the will of the youth to complete the necessary work, but QSpeak, at least on the surface, defines few regulations. Beck mentions in her interview that "sometimes the workshops are run depending who shows up on Saturday" (Beck Telephone). Basically, if the youth want to produce something of any quality, they must put in the effort. As a result, much of QSpeak's focus is on allowing the youth to define the process so that the production truly comes from their voice. In the end, Beck uses the discussions and stories of the youth to formulate a script that reflects their lives and message. This leads to the question whether or not providing so much freedom places a lot of work on the adult mentors/directors? But, because the onus is on the youth, do they learn to take responsibility and understand that they are vital to the process? Beck contends that although the structure of the program is, perhaps, not as defined, the "willingness and enthusiasm for the youth to participate and create a production pulls the process together in the end" (Beck Telephone).

Of course, the differences from group to group arise because of several factors and although they might learn something from one another, perhaps not every element translates to each group. For example, both Pride Players and True Colors link themselves to professional theaters; one for young audiences and one for adults, respectively. The resources and responsibilities that arise from those marriages affect the process and the end results. True Colors bills itself as a professional touring production that instigates social change. That label requires a certain quality and depth to continue its mission and reputation. Therefore, rehearsals take a formal tone and youth are penalized for absences. In the end, Evelyn tightens the show together and Abe, as Artistic Director, offers notes and, if necessary, edits. It is their responsibility to

ensure both the youth and audiences receive the best possible process and product. If they wanted to move in a different direction would formulating a more liberal structure or one with total youth control create too much inconsistency?

Although we did not speak specifically about the direct influence of Omaha Theater Company on Pride Players, a professional theater for young audiences company might provide access to various resources (i.e. experienced teaching artists/theatre professionals, pool of youth, facilities, community reputation). These could offer a foundation to which to build the program. On the other hand Guehring mentioned the initial, negative reaction of some OTC audience members to the formation of a LGBTQ youth program (Guehring Telephone). Any theater must weigh its programming against the audience it wishes to attract but a company gearing to young people can face even more scrutiny because of the protective nature by parents of their children. Although, the program continues to grow and succeed, how do the goals and needs of the parent company impact Pride Players' structure and methodology? Could True Colors present the same material if it were in a similar situation?

Because Proud Theater works independently from any other organization, they formulate their own rules and philosophies. Much of the structure comes from the founders and the youth. For instance, Kelly-Jones describes her personal ambition to start this program with Marty's mentorship and collaboration. Also Marty believes in treating young people as equals. Perhaps this initial trust and collaboration between the two translated into creating varied and powerful youth leadership positions with minimal adult management. Would this collaboration be the same if this took place in a professional theater company?

With its connection to a social service organization, QSpeak's work organizes itself in a non-theatrical setting. This provides the youth with needed resources that they don't receive from other organizations in the surrounding area. However, Beck explains that sometimes the social work takes away time from the theatrical process. Also the lack of public transportation and the need to seek outside work creates challenges for the youth to attend rehearsal. Therefore a strict attendance policy and structure might be difficult to implement. However, by not forming a rigid hierarchy and letting the youth take responsibility for the work, she allows as many voices as possible to enter the process. Though she takes responsibility in crafting the script, this provides enough structure to allow them to produce a final product. If True Colors conducted social service work would they be able to develop, rehearse, and tour two full productions in an 8 month period? But, what if there were no other LGBTQ resources for youth in the Boston area?

Obviously, each program is a product of the initial goals set when they were founded and the circumstances of their environment but there a few key elements that each could implement to become more youth-centered. First, the idea of creating a youth artistic team to make decisions and select adults to work in the program provides a safe and supportive place for youth to practice and hone leadership skills. Furthermore, electing members of this team provides youth with the responsibility of selecting the direction of the group. Second, skill building, artistic, personal, and professional provides the youth with tools to learn and grow so they can take on more risk and ownership. Lastly, youth should obtain the opportunity to perform for diverse audiences so that they may educate and change their community. Although not all audience members will be receptive to the message, it is important to reach beyond their comfort

zone and allow youth to stand up and express who they are. All four groups expressed the strong passion of the youth to become activists and make their environment safer for themselves and their community. Therefore, they should allow them to take on that role.

Each of these organizations and their leaders understand the importance of youth empowerment, especially within the LGBTQ community. As a result, they display a variety of techniques that fall in the definition of youth-centered. All of them have to balance their goals, resources, and limitations to develop programs that positively impact the youth while also creating art. True Colors can continue to examine these and other groups to learn and share how to make programming even stronger.

CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION

A Look Back

True Colors provides a unique opportunity to examine how youth-centered programming empowers the lives and community of a historically oppressed group of young people. When I began this study I understood that Evelyn and Abe valued this technique to collaborate with youth in the creation of art and activation of change. My goal was to analyze their methods for better insight and to possibly offer ideas to True Colors and others interested in similar work in order to make programming stronger. I see the importance of this methodology in creating art but also positively impacting the lives of young people. There are useful techniques that can inform similar programs wanting to empower young people, especially those compelled to activate social change within a group and a community.

One facet of this formula is True Colors' ability to create a safe-space for a group of young people that find few alternative outlets. Through exercises like the group check-in and ensemble games the troupe establishes an environment where youth feel free to be honest about who they are and that they are an integral to the community. This space helps them to overcome obstacles highlighted by Jeff Perrotti and the GLSEN survey. Jean Baker's findings agree with this idea as she believes that "though we lack the detailed knowledge of why some gay youth live in despair and others lead successful lives, we know that all children and adolescents need environments where they are not shamed, humiliated, treated as outcasts, or expected to remain quiet about who they are" (148).

Henry summed up this assessment in his interview because he feels True Colors “creates a place for LGBTQ youth to be themselves. It’s a drug, alcohol free place to anchor themselves and the community in a positive way. To the wider youth community, it helps others see and think about issues they didn’t think about. It’s an accessible way to reach people about the positive parts of the LGBTQ people” (Thompson Personal).

True Colors’ commitment to open discussion without fear of retribution allows the youth to express themselves, talk about dreams, fears, challenges and life celebrations. They received support, guidance, and encouragement from adult mentors and their peers. Troy highlights this point in his interview: “when I was younger I never thought I could talk or express my feelings. I couldn’t talk at home so I found a way to do it through theatre. True Colors has helped me to push me even further in this direction. They listen to me” (Troy Personal). Although adults structure the conversation, the youth possess the power and freedom to talk about what they want. This freedom allows for stewardship over the tone, direction of the conversation, and awareness of the youth-led nature of the group.

Additionally, adults became part of the sharing process which helped to break down certain barriers and allowed for personal connections. This interaction makes it easier for the adults and youth to collaborate later in the process because it builds trust and establishes a constant dialogue. In particular, the youth talk about their connection with the adults, especially Evelyn, as motivation to join and stay with the troupe. Troy reiterated this stating that “Evelyn is a big reason why I continue to return. She forms a community in a place where we can learn from her and each other” (Troy Personal). Other youth offer the same sentiment. Throughout the

course of the season I noticed youth like TC work with Evelyn as an equal which caused him to begin to mimic her demanding work ethic and high expectations from others. This was evident in the way he tried to rally the troupe after we lost Ricky and Niko. By the end most of the youth understood the hard work of running a touring company not only simply because it was difficult, but because Evelyn made them equal partners in completing the task.

True Colors allows the youth to use the youth-centered, safe-space to find their voice in order to create art and influence their community. Between writing exercises, improvisations, creating characters and script development the story is overwhelmingly their own. Their ability to research and select topics important to their existence allows them to control the content and in effect, the message. Not only does this cultivate authentic storytelling but it develops a bond between the youth and the work. Manuel talks about this bond in his interview:

I created and performed a monologue for the last troupe about my frustration with being rejected by my family members for coming out of the closet. It allowed me to really think about the situation and really honest feelings for the first time. The poetic structure of the piece opened his eyes to a new and creative way of communicating. I wouldn't have ever done something like this or expressed raw emotions in a positive way were it not for the troupe. (Manuel Personal)

Others continually talked about this ability to tell their story and allow their experiences to force audiences to think. Furthermore, the strong influence over scene creation and development allows them to use their voice and devise it into a creative piece of art. As a result, their

influence goes beyond the words and narrative but also the staging of those words into three-dimensional form.

Allowing the youth to share their stories and ideas in a unique format empowers them to impact their community. The tour permits the youth to shine and become part of the frontlines of The Theater Offensive and social change for the LGBTQ community. With the guidance and support of adults they face friendly and challenging audiences alike. True Colors provides a unique conduit of communication between the youth and their peers that celebrates their diversity while at the same time demonstrating similar experiences.

In particular, the tour targets venues, like DCF, to ensure that those who influence the lives of young people develop awareness to the multitude of needs of those they serve. In this respect the troupe understands the specific impacts that might result out of one of their performances because they are familiar with the challenges faced by LGBTQ youth in foster care. This sense of activism translates into their lives outside of the troupe. For instance, Maggie worked to try and organize a GSA at her former school and TC works as a youth leader for BAGLY. This coincides with Baker's conclusion that "young people who participate in community-based gay youth support groups often gain the courage to go back to their schools and become involved in support groups in the school setting" (19).

Shawn Ginwright and Taj James describe youth taking part in Social Justice go through a spiritual development. They state:

One of the most devastating impacts of oppression is self-blame and hopelessness. However, critical consciousness allows young people who feel victimized to remove self-blame and heal from ... forms of oppression. Healing can be described as psychological, emotional, and physical wellness. The healing process also leads to a spiritual development that provides youth with a sense of life purpose, empathy for the suffering of others, and optimism about social change. (Ginwright 41)

Throughout the tour the youth led the conversation, made decisions about what they wanted share with a group, and encouraged their peers to change the community. However, even if a performance didn't change the minds of a single audience member, the opportunity to present an original piece of art and see an audiences' reaction to it, emboldens them to continue to communicate. Henry reflects on this feeling saying that when "you have a personal message that you are afraid to share, you get up on stage and you think people will think you're a freak. But then someone will come up to you afterwards and say 'wow I connect with you or what you said.' It's empowering to feel that you can make a difference by sharing your story, even if you impact just one person" (Thompson Personal). If the youth simply performed a script or stated someone else's message, the act of performing might still empower them. However, by using their words they push even further to work hard and make it clear that they want the world to change. Furthermore, Perrotti agrees with the theory of the troupe members that "openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and straight allies can have a large impact by talking to students about their lives. When these presenters are young people, the impact is most powerful (156)."

These various opportunities for the youth to develop and share their voice allow them to build professional skills that further empower and prepare them for life outside of the troupe. These skills go beyond training in the arts but also the greater world. It is not common for a youth arts program to hire their participants. In many cases, organizations collect fees from young people to take part. The youth might participate without a financial incentive, but in paying the youth True Colors demonstrates that the company respects their time and work. By treating them as professionals the young people take responsibility and try to work at a higher level.

Beyond the money, the troupe develops skills through hands-on experience and collaboration with adults. As rehearsals and tour progress they make decisions, brainstorm ways to overcome challenges, work as equals with adults to run a professional tour company, and take on the responsibility of becoming role-models to other youth. It might be easier for an adult to always take charge but allowing the youth to help run the company builds work ethic, fosters trust, and allows the youth to impact their experience. According to Linda Lang she finds that “although teachers [who take a collaborative approach] suggested to her that they valued the opportunities for students' individual growth, many stressed that the model's greatest potential as a teaching tool manifested in the development of students' social skills and community” (Lang 58).

For instance, there were occasions riding in the van to a venue when Evelyn told the youth to find a way to replace two absent actors before we reached the venue. She did this not only because she was driving, but because she understood the capability of the ensemble to

collaborate and make the adjustments. For many of the youth, True Colors is their first job. The lessons they learn within the rehearsal and production process might impact them later on in life because providing them with so much responsibility forces them to communicate and work together to strive for challenging goals and demand more of themselves and their peers. For example, by the end of the troupe Becky acknowledged that “the skills I learned here could be useful in a job setting outside of theater because you are forced to problem solve and think on your feet all the time” (Becky Personal).

Moving Forward

As True Colors evolves there are certain areas where the program can strengthen the youth-centered methods in order to reach higher potentials for both the troupe and the youth it serves. Again, some of these observations directly relate to the individuals and circumstances of this specific troupe but there are lessons that can be utilized in all future troupes.

A key element towards this continued growth is the training of the young people. For example, one of the side-effects of devising, rehearsing, and touring a production is that it leaves little time for instruction or honing of talent. Although the ensemble building includes preparing the youth to perform, much of their learning comes from the practice they receive in rehearsal. The expertise they acquire during this phase is extremely useful and necessary for their artistic growth, but if they acquired a stronger foundation and vocabulary, they might rely less on Evelyn to lead the artistic process. For instance, with more training they might feel confident and capable of shaping blocking and characters or even direct a good portion of the entire piece. Also

by examining various dramatic forms and works of others they might expand their ability to develop scripts. This could further empower them as individuals, storytellers and activists of social change.

With more training True Colors might be able to take the script and production to a higher artistic level. At its core, the tour is a very raw piece of theatre that depends on novice performers and a bare-bones budget. Audiences often made comments about the troupe enhancing its design elements or performing a full-script instead of segmented scenes and monologues. To that point, with more training the youth could learn how to create more cohesive designs elements instead of wearing personal attire or relying on chairs as their only set pieces. Creating a more developed script, sharpening acting skills, and increasing production values could help the storytelling process and create the world of the youth for the audience to see more clearly. However, in its current format, the production provides the element most necessary for True Colors: the voice of the youth. As a result, the intensity and ability to change minds comes from their mouths and hearts. The production achieves the goal of providing a platform for the youth and spurs thoughtful conversation from its audiences. If and when True Colors moves to another level of artistic quality, it should not lose sincerity and authenticity by muddying it with unnecessary elements.

One could argue that stricter auditioning requirements and higher production values will gather more experienced troupe members. However, this limits the reach of the troupe to those with arts training. As a result, the process might run more efficiently but the end product would

not provide an authentic view of the community or an opportunity for young people to stand up for who they are.

However there is a place for more artistic training. Youth like Troy and Manuel talk about their wish to become professional actors and their desire for more acting skills to reach that goal. Although the troupe provides the fundamentals, they want more. Manuel is still trying to discover ways to audition for film industry. True Colors might find an answer to this with their new Summer Troupe that focuses on artistic training with little emphasis production building and activism. The youth who attend the summer program will be able to acquire new skills and utilize them in the fall and spring troupes in the hopes of making artistic choices for themselves. Also, they could share these talents and techniques with the troupe members who did not attend.

Another aspect that is essential to sustaining youth-centered environment is the reinforcement of the peer-leadership team. Having young people take on leadership roles develops their talents but also demonstrates to the rest of the troupe that a member of their group influences the process. In the evaluation session the youth agreed about the importance of peer-leadership. However, this season was only the second time that certain youth took on the formal roles of peer leaders. Evelyn is trying to figure out how to better integrate them into the process. Moving forward, there are certain elements that will make this team stronger. First, although peer leaders come from a pool of experienced troupe members, they need a foundation of leadership training. This training should encompass aspects from knowing how to provide positive feedback and constructive criticism, learning about becoming positive role-models, and using power to foster teamwork. Although Maggie mentioned that she “felt comfortable taking

charge to make things flow the way they are supposed to”, many of the situations where the peer-leaders and the rest of the troupe did not agree stemmed from their lack of knowledge of how to effectively encourage others. Formal training sessions will help this challenge.

Any training should also encompass learning the specific skills necessary for each role. For instance, the Assistant Director might learn constructive feedback techniques, how to work alongside a director, basic staging, etc... Although as returning troupe members their experience provided a chance to observe Evelyn and others in similar roles, with specific skills they will better understand their place in the troupe and how to communicate more effectively.

However, another challenge is that there seemed a disconnection between the purpose of the peer leaders and the rest of the troupe. If the troupe themselves discuss or even help brainstorm the roles of the peer leaders they might gather an understanding about and responsibility for creating those positions. Looking at the example of Proud Theater, perhaps allowing the youth to elect their leaders, will place the onus on the troupe instead of the adult. As a result, the process becomes more democratic and youth-centered because the youth they come together and decide their leaders without feeling adults bypass their opinions. Nevertheless, because of the need to keep a consistency from troupe to troupe, Evelyn should remain a strong voice behind nominating members to lead. She understands the readiness of the youth and knows about possible outside obstacles that might impede a leader (i.e. school, family, job).

There is the possibility that a leadership and training program could generate a True Colors that is completely youth run with only a small amount of adult guidance. In such a case the youth truly become the voice and propellant of all its undertakings. This reality might come

to fruition but the challenge lies in the logistics of creating such an establishment. Between maintaining a budget, organizing tour venues, acquiring transportation, training new members, and working with other community organizations the youth might not be able to tackle all the needs at once. The demands of a professional company create pressures that the youth are not ready for. Even current troupe members believe in the need for adult leadership. Gloria feels “that the troupe has a lot of control in what goes into the play. But from my perspective, I think we have a little too much control because people easily get off track and task (Gloria Personal).

Also, there is something to be said about the collaboration with positive, adult role-models that Evelyn works relentlessly to gather for the youth. From interns and guest artists to community activists and teachers, the youth encounter a variety of adults to emulate and learn from. Many of the youth talk about negative experiences with the adults in their lives. True Colors provides a chance for troupe members to connect with adults who understand the needs of the youth are always put ahead of everything else. This provides a positive training ground for artists and activists, but more importantly productive members of the community.

In essence the current balance of power allows for a large amount of guidance, planning, and consistency from the adults with an emphasis that the voice of the youth is the most important. Are there ways to make that voice even stronger? Of course! However, Evelyn and the support she receives from the rest of The Theater Offensive is one of the key assets of this strengthening. Her dedication to the troupe creates a strong bond with each of the youth because she ensures the troupe’s goals match those of the youth. All of the youth have her cell-phone programmed into their phones and they call her about dilemmas beyond what goes on in the

troupe and she answers every time. Manuel took this assessment to the next level saying “Evelyn needs more help running and developing the troupe. She devotes so much of herself to this” (Manuel Personal).

Also, Evelyn understands the importance of continually reflecting and evaluating on how to make the program stronger and she is not afraid to come up with new ideas that can reach this goal. For instance, she is trying to discover a way for select troupe members to sit on the Board of Directors of the theater so that they have input on decisions that affect them. Also, she continues to analyze and revamp evaluation tools so that opinions, suggestions, and growth measurements continue to effectively serve the youth and the community. She forms partnerships with new organizations to provide a multitude of opportunities for the young people and continue to broaden her skills as a youth worker and theatre professional. Evelyn understands the importance and value of youth-centered programming because she utilizes its benefits for the betterment of the troupe and the youth. “In the end,” she says, “we are here to serve the youth, and we I make that my goal every single day.”

Lessons Learned

I entered this journey uncertain how a youth theatre troupe begins to tackle the many struggles of the LGBTQ community. I also didn’t understand how placing such onus on the youth could be an effective tool to create a professional production that is meant to change hearts and minds. However, this process altered my perspective and approach in numerous aspects of my professional and personal life.

As an artist I understood the importance of authentic voice and narrative in providing thought provoking and moving storytelling. True Colors reinforced this concept but also forced me to discover that often the simplest techniques provide the most effective storytelling tools. The youth do not need an expert playwright to construct interesting characters or witty dialogue. Of course, a set and costumes help to create a picture but all that is necessary is an honest story with spirit and passion behind the words. It's not that each of the youth will become acclaimed stage actors but they reveal that everyone has a story to tell that can engage and entertain. When I hear comments from Becky about how she feels her stories "build empathy from the audience which provides motivation and investment," I know they understand the power of this work (Becky Personal). Yes, some of the events that the youth write about speak to difficult struggles and experiences but I'm moved less with what happened or how they identify than I am in their willingness to share who they are. After all, the program's true audience is not the people who see the tour, but the youth who perform in it. In future work, especially with devising original theatre, I will keep in mind these storytelling techniques because they connect actors to the material and audiences to the experiences they see onstage.

In the beginning of this study I asked the question whether or not the collaborative model of this program coupled with young actors could produce a professional product. Although there are spots that are rough around the edges, the youth overcame any of these elements through their connection to and passion for the work. There is no doubt that the story is their own and audiences react in awe and admiration for the work they put forth. If they continue to hone their

skills as storytellers, they will make their message stronger and change even more hearts and minds.

As a teacher, I see the value in developing a youth-centered environment. Although as adults we have more experience and we train on how to facilitate learning, the youth better understand their needs and when they feel that they have a part in the decision making process, they become more invested and interested in continuing. Of course, it is challenging for teachers or facilitators to relinquish some of this power. In True Colors we tried to keep the troupe on track with rehearsal and the devising process. However, the youth make up the dynamic of the troupe, each offering their own strengths and weaknesses. We provide them with a lot of control so that they obtain ownership over the process and so we may hear from all perspectives. Sometimes, this creates a bumpy ride. Nevertheless, I learned that with a balance between finding opportunities for youth to share their voice and constructing a consistent structure, adults and young people can collaborate to develop an environment where both learn from each other while completing the necessary work. Sometimes this is as simple as adults adjusting the tone in which we speak to young people to one that provides guidance but is inclusive of their needs and wants.

As an adult watching a group of young people learn to form a family and grow as individuals makes me believe that this program is helping the next generation begin on the right foot. I see youth like Becky and Gloria, who both claimed to struggle in social situations, stand onstage and try to change the world through the words and stories. I know TC, whose energy is challenging to rein in, will continue to work in entertainment because of his passion and the

artistic aesthetic he formulates through the program. Troy and Manuel are both attempting to discover the career paths True Colors can guide them to because they learned how to utilize the resources and personal connections available to them. Although Maggie struggled with the leadership position, True Colors helped her to admit that she has more learning to do and is willing to put in the effort to improve. Brie and Niko unfortunately left the troupe before the end but made profound impacts to the development of characters and storyline in the play which helped share their voice even when they were not there. Of all the youth that I came in contact with, Ricky became the illustration of a young man discovering a personal talent for the first time. True Colors opened his eyes to new possibilities of personal expression and it is unfortunate personal circumstances pushed him away. In all the troupe members, even those who could not take part in this study demonstrated a willingness to jump in headfirst into this process in order to change themselves and their community. Even Henry, a former member, became an intern to stay connected and continue to grow with this work and clamors for an alumni troupe. It is a testament to Evelyn's leadership and her commitment to creating a youth-centered environment that allowed them to explore and grow.

Personally, one of the most challenging and revealing moments of the process came during the performance-sharing with the youth at the Citi Performing Arts Center. During the game of "The West-Wind Blows" one of the troupe members called upon anyone who identified as LGBTQ to search for a new chair. I was playing the game right along with them when I realized none of the youth from Citi knew that I am Gay. I don't hide who I am from the youth I work with but I typically leave my personal life out of conversations. With some hesitation I

stood from my seat and looked for an empty chair. In that moment I felt extremely proud not to hide who I am and the community I stand for but also vulnerable that the youth knew more about me than I usually disclose.

In reflection of that experience I realized that I was collaborating with a troupe of young people not afraid of expressing who they are. At the same time I realized, I was afraid. I found it interesting that I was able to open up to the LGBTQ youth but with others I was tentative. Why? How can I truly activate change in others if I felt unsure of myself? As I moved further into the process the youth inspired me through their work and bravery to share their lives and stories. As a result they taught me to stand firm behind who I am and what I believe. Maybe if I participated in a program like True Colors when I was their age my reaction to the experience might be different. However, I'm ready to fully take the leap with them to better our world.

Working with True Colors provided me a chance to work with youth who better their community while also bettering themselves. In return I hope I had a part in creating a place where young people come to feel safe, supported, and find opportunities for their voices to be heard and counted. Although I didn't have this opportunity as a teen, now as an adult, teacher, artist, and activist I endeavor to continue to learn, listen, and collaborate with youth make sure their voice rings loud no matter the situation and never stop learning from everything they have to offer. I know now I can echo Manuel's last statement to me in his interview: "we have a voice and we are not afraid to use it."

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901, 407-882-2012 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Notice of Expedited Initial Review and Approval

From : UCF Institutional Review Board
FWA00000351, Exp. 6/24/11, IRB00001138

To : Nicholas E. Bazo

Date : October 23, 2008

IRB Number: SBE-08-05859

Study Title: **Sharing the TRUE COLORS: An Exploration of Theatre with Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth**

Dear Researcher:

Your research protocol noted above was approved by **expedited** review by the UCF IRB Chair on 10/23/2008. **The expiration date is 10/22/2009.** Your study was determined to be minimal risk for human subjects and expeditable per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.110. The categories for which this study qualifies as expeditable research are as follows:

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The IRB has approved a **consent procedure which requires participants to sign consent forms. Use of the approved stamped consent document(s) is required.** Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Subjects or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

NOTE: As previously stipulated, you must upload in iRIS a signed letter from the Theatre company director/ manager giving you permission to recruit and conduct your research prior to beginning your research. If you have questions, please contact IRB office staff members.

All data, which may include signed consent form documents, must be retained in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

To continue this research beyond the expiration date, a Continuing Review Form must be submitted 2 – 4 weeks prior to the expiration date. Advise the IRB if you receive a subpoena for the release of this information, or if a breach of confidentiality occurs. Also report any unanticipated problems or serious adverse events (within 5 working days). Do not make changes to the protocol methodology or consent form before obtaining IRB approval. Changes can be submitted for IRB review using the Addendum/Modification Request Form. An Addendum/Modification Request Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <http://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

Failure to provide a continuing review report could lead to study suspension, a loss of funding and/or publication possibilities, or reporting of noncompliance to sponsors or funding agencies. The IRB maintains the authority under 45 CFR 46.110(e) to observe or have a third party observe the consent process and the research.

On behalf of Tracy Dietz, Ph.D., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 10/23/2008 11:09:54 AM EDT

APPENDIX B: FALL 2008 SCRIPT

Final Draft

Not Just A Character

Written and created by
True Colors: Out Youth Theater
2008 Fall Troupe

TRUE COLORS INTRO:

Hello, everyone. We are happy to be here today. We are True Colors: Out Youth Theater, a theater program for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth and their straight allies, ages 14-22. Today's presentation is Not Just A Character, an original play written & created by True Colors. As a reminder, please put all your mobile devices on silent and please refrain from any flash photography. And now, True Colors in Not Just A Character!

[Actors move into places for opening.]

Opening: Group Poem

MIKE

I've had ambitions to do a lot of things. I wanna study forensics and law but I also want to study theatre and dance. I also have ambitions to join the armed forces.

BECKY

I want to meet lots of interesting people, and get to know them as best I can even if at first glance it seems like they're creepy or annoying or snobbish. I want to find out what makes them interesting and special and important and loveable and necessary to this world... and why absolutely nobody else could replace them.

SANDY

My love life is a mess. I've never had a good relationship. It's hard to find somebody who respects who I am and who wants me always. Not to mention it's hard to find girls even interested.

MANUEL

I am Manuel, I am real, and I want the world to hear...I kissed a boy and I liked it.

TROY

I crave. I need. I want. I fear. I live. I love.

GLORIA

I'm Gloria

BECKY

I am Becky. I am pagan.

MANUEL

I am the kid that took those pills.

TROY

Abused. Raped. Molested. Scared. Cold. Homeless.

SANDY

My life isn't easy, despite what I've been given. Inside, I am an emotional wreck. I don't expect sympathy for my problems I'd rather work on making better memories.

GLORIA

I had a school phobia, but it won't slow me down.

MIKE

I don't do too well in school because I have ADD, but I still choose the AP class over the regular high school class.

BECKY

I'm Becky. I am formally diagnosed with Aspersers and ADD.

MIKE

My name is Mike. I am a gay youth. I like to play sports and work out just as much as I like to act and dance.

MANUEL

I am Manuel. I am the kid that wore black eyeliner. I am the kid you used to make fun of in school.

SANDY

My name is Sandy. I am accepting of many things. I rock the rainbow.

GLORIA

I'm Gloria and I'm bisexual. Even though I am bisexual, I have never been in a gay relationship. And I can't be in a straight relationship unless I find the right guy.

TROY

Troy Madison Timmons. 19 years old. Virgo. Call me what you want. Not just a character...

[Actors freeze. Music plays. Actor transition to TOUGH LOVE. Music fades.]

Genie In A Hammer:

Troy: Peter

Maggie: Harley Diesel

Mike: Jason

TC: Mr. Alexander

Sandy: Amanda

Becky: Kristen

MR. ALEXANDER

Ten Minute till the end of class.

AMANDA

Oh my god, he's so gay. (pause) What a queer.

MR. ALEXANDER

(To Jason and Amanda) Come on get back to work. (Brief pause) Look you got nothing done.

AMANDA

(To Mr. Alexander) Us? What about him? Look, he's filing his nails.

MR. ALEXANDER

Peter What are you doing? This isn't Home Ec, this is Shop.

PETER

I'm sorry. I was just trying to figure this out, but I don't know how to do it.

MR. ALEXANDER

(Interrupting him mid-sentence) I don't care what you were doing. Get to work. Finish your birdhouse.

AMANDA

Look at him he can't even hold his hammer right. Go back to Beauty School!

PETER

You think you're funny...

MR. ALEXANDER

(Interrupts PETER) Peter! Didn't I say get to work. Now be quite.

SANDY

Wow! What a homo.

PETER

What is your problem?

MR. ALEXANDER

Peter! Get back to work.

PETER

Why do you keep telling me to get back to work! I'm trying to work, but they keep harassing me! Why don't you do anything about them?

MR. ALEXANDER

Stop causing problems, Peter. (Checks the time, Then speaks to the whole class) Okay, class is almost over for today. I want everyone to take home their project and finish them, tomorrow we are going be presenting them. Also don't forget that today is the Student Council Election. And before I end the class KRISTEN what to say something to all of you.

KRISTEN

(Stands up and walks to the front of the class) Hi, I just wanted to make sure that everyone is going to be voting for me, and if you do I'll make you're your senior year is the best year ever.

MR. ALEXANDER

Thanks, Kristen. Alright, with that said, have a great day and I'll see you during sixth period. (Then exits stage left)

[Class exits. JASON stands stage left waiting for AMANDA as she crosses to PETER.]

AMANDA

I just wanted to tell you that you're holding your hammer wrong, queeny.

[AMANDA & JASON exit stage left. PETER moves center.]

PETER

(To himself) I'm so sick and tired of her harassing me... holding my hammer wrong.. why does it matter anyway?

[As PETER waves the hammer in the air, genie music plays. Harley enters as Peter looks around trying to figure out where the music is coming from.]

HARLEY

What!

PETER

Nice tool belt. Who are you?

HARLEY

The name is HARLEY Diesel, and I'm your genie for the time being.

PETER

You're a genie? (pause) I thought genies were supposed to come out of a bottle, and I thought they were supposed to be girly and feminine?

HARLEY

First off, we can pick where we want to live and I picked a hammer. Second of all the stereotype of the genie's that blink and say "yes master" is so outdated. That's Hollywood's fault, most genies look nothing like the commercialized versions. They look like normal people. Do you have a problem with that buddy? (pause) Didn't think so. Now do you want your wishes or not?

PETER

How many do I get?

HARLEY

Three, Hollywood got that part right.

PETER

Okay! Then my first wish... a #2 pencil for my next class

[HARLEY reaches in tool belt and takes out a pencil, and hands it to PETER.]

HARLEY

Granted.

PETER

Okay, okay, My next wish... hmmm... I want to win the lottery!

[HARLEY reaches in tool belt and takes out a scratch ticket, and hands it to PETER.]

HARLEY

Granted.

[PETER scratches the ticket. It is a winner!]

PETER

I WON! (HARLEY grabs the ticket back and rips it up into pieces) Hey what are you doing? That ticket was a winner!

HARLEY

You said you wanted to win and that was all. You never mentioned anything about getting the money. You have to be clearer with how you word your wishes cause you ask it. I grant it. It's instant.

PETER
Then, I really need to think about my third wish. (pause) My Third wish... I want...

*[JASON enters SL. Harley *snaps* and "disappears"]*

PETER
What are you doing here, Jason?

JASON
I wanted to apologize for what AMANDA said earlier.

PETER
Why? It's not like you were stopping her.

JASON
(Crosse to PETER) You know I can't. Then everyone will think I'm being sympathizing for the gay kid. Then everyone would know...

PETER
(Interrupts JASON) Everyone will know your gay, I know I know.

JASON
Look you're my friend, but I can't be like you. I can't be open about myself.

[AMANDA enters.]

AMANDA
What are you doing talking to that faggot?

JASON
I just came to finish my birdhouse...

[JASON crosses DL to Amanda. They speak silently to each other as PETER speaks to HARLEY]

PETER
Genie? Where are you?

HARLEY
(*snap*) I'm guessing you're ready with that third wish now.

PETER
Yes, I am. My friend Jason is gay, and he is having a real hard time being himself because of it. So I wish that Jason will realize what he really needs to do, so he can be true to himself.

HARLEY
So you want this kid to show his True Colors?

PETER
Yes!

[JASON crosses to his classroom chair. AMANDA exits.]

HARLEY
Alright, I'll see what I can do. Run along and let me do my job.

[PETER exits. JASON watches him go. HARLEY slowly crosses to JASON. JASON hears everything that HARLEY is saying, but is trying his best to ignore it.]

HARLEY

Hello Jason. Jason... hello... don't talk, just listen. So, you're finally admitting to yourself that your gay. I'm proud of you. But hiding it from the everyone is anything but healthy. You need to have confidence in yourself that showing others who you really are will truly be a good thing. I'm only trying to help. ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME!?

JASON

Yes!

[JASON puts down his birdhouse and moves centerstage.]

HARLEY

You need to do what's right for you, and coming out is what you need to do. It'll be hard at first but in the long run you'll be happier.

JASON

(To himself, with resistance) I'm Gay.

HARLEY

I can't hear you.

JASON

(To Himself and HARLEY, realizing that he is gay) I'm gay.

HARLEY

What was that?

[AMANDA enters.]

JASON

(To everyone) I'M GAY!

AMANDA

What did you say?

*[HARLEY *snaps* and disappears to AMANDA & JASON. She moves up stage right to watch the scene unfold.]*

JASON

Amanda, sit down.

AMANDA

Ummm, I'm all set.

JASON

There is something I need to tell you. I'm sorry if this hurts you, but I'm gay. (pause) I really hope we can still be friends.

AMANDA

(Hurt) So what does this mean... I meant nothing to you?

JASON

No you mean everything to me, I just don't think we can be together anymore. It's just not right for me to do this to you or to myself.

AMANDA

This whole relationship has been a lie, Jason. Every time you said you loved me – a lie. Everything was just one giant lie. Well I'm not keep quiet. Everyone is going to know, just wait. You hurt me, now I'm going to get my revenge.

[Transition to the student council elections assembly. STUDENTS fill the seats. KRISTEN enters from stage left and is stopped by AMANDA. AMANDA whispers into KRISTEN's ear and then points at JASON. AMANDA takes her seat in the back of the assembly.]

MR. ALEXANDER

(Enters from stage left, and walks to KRISTEN) Kristen, Jason, can I please talk to you? Alright, I just want to check in with both of you and make sure your both ready for your big speeches.

Both JASON and KRISTEN

Yes!

MR. ALEXANDER

Good luck, Kristen. Both of you take a seat and we are going get started.

[MR. ALEXANDER crosses to the STUDENTS to quiet them.]

KRISTEN

Hey, Jason. Good luck. Are you ready to come out?

[KRISTEN crosses to her seat. JASON follows with dread.]

MR. ALEXANDER

(Walks to the front of the assembly) Alright students calm down. I need everyone's attention. (pause) Okay, so welcome everyone, we are going to get the Student Council Election Speech Assembly started. I need everyone to pay close attention to both candidates and what they want to achieve if elected president. First up we have KRISTEN. (Crosses to stage right to sit.)

KRISTEN

(Stands up and moves center center) Hello, everyone. Thank you, thank you. When I am elected president I will do my best to shorten the amount of homework we get each night. I will get more vending machines in the cafeteria, and I will attempt to get more funding for class field trips. Now before I hand the floor off to my opponent I would like to inform all of you that he has been lying to everyone and hiding a major secret from all of us. Jason is gay. Now do you want a gay class president? I think not, so if you're smart you'll vote for me the NORMAL candidate.

MR. ALEXANDER

Great speech, Kristen. Very nice, next up we have Jason.

JASON

Yes, it is true. I am gay. But that shouldn't influence your decisions on who to vote for. You should vote based on who you think will make a better president, and I'd like to point out that if my opponent is willing to out someone who was once a friend, then what makes you think that she won't turn on every single one of you. I want all of you to know that if I'm elected president I will make sure that every student is treated equally and that none of you are discriminated against. Not by students and not by teachers. Vote for me Jason the HONEST candidate.

[STUDENTS slowly begin to applaud then give JASON a standing ovation.]

MR. ALEXANDER

Okay, okay... (pause) So that is both candidates vote wisely. Ballots will be passed out during last period. Have a great day, and ill see you all tomorrow. (exits stage left)

[STUDENTS all exit stage left/stage right while talking and laughing. PETER runs to meet JASON.]

PETER

Jason, I'm so proud of you for coming out, and in front of the whole school that takes a lot of guts. What made you realize that it was the right time to come out?

JASON

I don't know. It's almost like a little birdie told me to do it.

PETER

Well, I want you to know that it does get easier but you never stop coming out. You have to do it everyday of your life from now on. Some days it'll be hard and others will be a piece of cake but in the long run you'll be happy with the choice you made to be yourself.

[JASON and PETER hug.]

HARLEY

(*snap*) Okay, enough of the mushy stuff. You've gotten your three wishes, now can I have my hammer back? I'm going to go bury it somewhere no can find it and sleep the rest of my existence away.
[PETER hands HARLEY the hammer.]

JASON

Hey! Who is that?

[Actor freezes. Music plays. Actors transition to Monologues. Music fades.]

Monologues 1

"A Not So Typical Fairy Tale"

MAGGIE

Standing there all I could see
Was a giant red and silver blur rushing past me
when it stopped
the doors slid open to a new world that excited me
"The Destination Of This Train is Alewife"
Time passes
music's blaring
A muffled sound
"Entering Park Street doors will open on both sides"
I Exit the blur
to climb aboard a huge green monster
Boylston
Arlington
Copley
The doors opening up were like the gates to a fairy tale word
Which I entered for the first time
people walking past
cars rushing by

MAGGIE (cont.)
 little did I know then
 this world would be a temptation for old habits
 I'd stumble down the cobble stone sidewalks
 My mind anything but clear
 Clouded by a layer of thick smoke tinted green
 Double vision induced by the constant flow of pungent tasting poison
 In this fantasy world
 as the months passed
 I Found Prince Charming
 And as the pages in my book turned
 I realized the Prince wasn't quite what was intended in my fairy tale
 Then I started spiraling downward
 Into a dark whole
 With no sign of light at the end
 Then the light broke through
 And I discovered the comforts of a community
 Where I met a dozen characters who helped piece me back together again
 But I never lost sight of home
 where I was accepted by few
 still it was where I found comfort from the evils of my days
 the people who I cherished more than life
 It was safe
 But now almost 3 years have past
 In this not so typical fairy tale
 a lot has changed throughout the pages
 the faces
 and the places
 most of all the relationships
 but still this space will always be
 That fairy tale book that accepted me

[Maggie exits Troy crosses to Center]

TROY
 Open your heart, Close the Zipper!
 Whatever happened to your morals?
 Anyone have standards these days?
 Stop giving yourself away.
 I'm looking for love,
 Don't have to be sent from above,
 A loving man, someone real,
 Open my eyes with your appeal...
 Date me, Love me,
 Kiss me, then you can do thee.
 Sex? There's more to life than that...
 Hit me up with something more...
 Dates. Boyfriends. Marriage.
 My kind of thing.
 Don't be a simple fling,
 I want the bing bada bing,
 The whole shabang,
 On one knee, give you this ring,
 I can hear it now,

TROY (cont)
 Tears flow, you whisper "Yes", Wow!
 And that begins forever, together.
 Don't fear the love.
 God made me right, gave me plenty from above,
 With it we can live,
 A heart yearns to give,
 Show me you're someone to adore,
 A heart is the last thing you can ignore,
 This journey we can endure,
 Show me a human with love that is pure.
 Sex? There's more to life than that,
 Hit me up with something more!

[Actor freezes. Music plays. Actors transition to Split Scene. Music fades.]

SPLIT

Gloria: Rachel ONE
 Sandy: Rachel TWO
 Becky: Sarah
 TC: Stanley

Mike: Mr. Wright
 Maggie: Mother
 Party Person One: Manuel
 Party Person Two/Student Body President: Troy

[STUDENTS file into their seats in the classroom. The TEACHER, Mr. Wright, is writing on a chalkboard at CC. STUDENT BODY PRESIDENT doing announcements is DR.]

STUDENT BODY PRESIDENT

Good morning, Oak Hills High School! This is your student body president with a few morning announcements. Don't forget the football game is this Saturday night at 8pm – go Rockets!! The drama club will also be presenting RENT, jr., a G-rated version of the Broadway musical. Senior, Stanley Fortunato, is fabulous in the role of Mimi, who is learning to live with a dangerous upper-respiratory infection. Tickets will be on sale at lunch. Finally, I would like to congratulate the following students for receiving major college scholarships: Kat Summers to UMASS Amherst, Rachel Smith to Harvard University, Patty Flannigan to Yale University, and Sam Stonewall to Emerson College. Congratulations to all of you, you are ideal representatives for the school as you move onward in your education. Have a great day, everyone!

[Teacher, MR. WRIGHT, walks down the rows passing back graded tests and stops when he gets to RACHEL ONE]

MR. WRIGHT

(To class) Good morning, class! I am returning your tests to you today. Nice job, everyone. You had above average test scores for the most part this time. Keep up the good work. (To Rachel) Rachel, can I speak with you for a moment. (they move away for the class, he hands her test to her) I don't know where your head was for this test. Did you not understand the concepts?

RACHEL ONE

A "C-"?! Is this a joke? (pause) I thought that I knew the material, Mr. Wright. I studied for the test. I guess I've just been so focused on my college applications lately.

MR. WRIGHT

Well, try to keep your focus on your schoolwork now that you have your scholarship. This was a major test, so your GPA may be affected. I'm disappointed in your ability to succeed under pressure. Regardless, this is not a time for you to fall off track with your grades.

RACHEL ONE

(To herself) All I do is focus on my grades. (To Mr. Wright) I'll do better from now on.

[MR. WRIGHT exits SR. STUDENTS stay in the classroom silently chatting. RACHEL ONE crosses DR to SARAH, her girlfriend, in the hallway]

SARAH

Hey, Hunnybunny! (They hug) I heard the announcement. Congratulations on the scholarship. I am so proud of you (Rachel then shows Sarah her test) Whoa. A "C-"? How is that possible? I didn't see you all weekend because of this test. You couldn't take your nose out of your book long enough to even call me. It's okay. You will rock the final. Hey, STANLEY is having a party tonight after the opening of her show. Let's go and get your mind off of this.

RACHEL ONE

I don't know. I have a lot of work I need to get done and parties aren't really my thing.

SARAH

I know but it would be good for you to get out, relax and have a good time. You did get that scholarship, right? Why not celebrate!

RACHEL ONE

Okay, we can go for a bit. I have spent years working to get this scholarship, right? I need to have some fun, now!

[STUDENTS become PARTY PEOPLE. Solo cups are in everyone's hand, music is playing, and everyone is dancing. RACHEL ONE and SARAH move CC into the party. When they enter, all the PARTY PEOPLE yell congratulations to RACHEL ONE.]

(overlapping)

PARTY PERSON ONE

Rachel, congratulations!

PARTY PERSON TWO

Hey, genius!

PARTY PERSON THREE

Nice of you to grace us with your presence!

PARTY PERSON FOUR

Sarah, where's your scholarship?

[STANLEY crosses out of the pack of PARTY PEOPLE to CC. She is holding two solo cups.]

STANLEY

Hey, guys. Don't listen to him. He's been drinking since 3:30 this afternoon.

RACHEL ONE

STANLEY, it's good to see you. How did your show go tonight?

STANLEY

Great! We had a packed house, which isn't really difficult when the show's running time is only 26 minutes.

SARAH

I heard that about the show. RENT, jr.? Who's idea was that?

STANLEY

I guess the administration felt like the themes competed with our abstinence-only-drugs-and-alcohol-don't-exist education.

SARAH

If they only knew. Hey, hunnybunny, I'm going to go say hello to a few people, okay?

STANLEY

Hey, Rachel, congrats on that big scholarship. You're going to be a Harvard girl and leave all us little people behind, huh (they laugh)? Hey, can I get you a drink? You, of all of the people here, deserve it.

[ALL freeze except RACHEL ONE. She looks around at the PARTY PEOPLE. RACHEL ONE steps forward to speak directly to the audience.]

RACHEL ONE

I have spent most of my high school career in my room studying. I knew that if I was going to get to college, I had to make it happen because my parents couldn't. So, here I am. It's the end of my senior year and I've never been to a party like this. The reason that I know any of these people is because I've had class with them, or study hall, or lunch. I don't really know any of them. And they don't really know me. (Pause. RACHEL TWO enters and speaks in unison on underlined text) I wish that I could split myself in two and see how the other half lives. I could get a drink. I could finally kick back and relax the way that I never have been able to for my entire high school career. All the stress and lectures about my "future", I deserve a drink. But I know the risk that I would be taking in making these people my friends. What can they really offer me? My future is too important to me. I choose the road less traveled. I won't take the drink...

RACHEL TWO

(Finishing Rachel One's sentence, to audience) ...but I will. It's just one drink. One drink and I will be in with this group of people who have always thought that I was "too geeky" to party. It's my senior year! I've got the scholarship to Harvard. I've got the amazing girlfriend. Now, I'll be part of the click that I always wanted to be part of. And all I have to do is take the drink. (To STANLEY, but loud enough for all the party people to hear) Sure. I'll take a drink.

[RACHEL ONE exits. STANLEY, surprised by RACHEL's response, hands her a drink. ALL PARTY PEOPLE cheer as RACHEL chugs the drink.]

STANLEY

(over the cheering) Excellent! I didn't know you were such a party girl, Rachel.

[SARAH seeing RACHEL drink, crosses to her]

SARAH

She's not. Where is this coming from? Why are you drinking?

RACHEL TWO

I don't know. I just thought that it would be fun. Why you bring me here? To celebrate, right? So, let's celebrate!

[RACHEL TWO grabs SARAH and starts to dance. The PARTY PEOPLE cheer for them.]

SARAH

Okay, but no more drinks. You know that's not my thing.

[RACHEL hands off her cup to STANLEY behind SARAH's back. STANLEY hands her a new cup.]

RACHEL TWO

No problem.

[Music gets louder. PARTY PEOPLE surround the two of them. Music fades. ALL freeze. SARAH moves out of the crowd to sit SR. She looks upset. RACHEL ONE enters the classroom.]

RACHEL ONE

Sarah? What are you doing in here? This isn't your class.

SARAH

You're right. But this was the only place that I knew that I could find you. (Pause) You left me at the party. Why?

RACHEL ONE

Honestly?

SARAH

Honestly.

RACHEL ONE

Okay. So, I was there with you, having a good time, but all I could think about was that test. And then there were all those drunk people and I am just not comfortable in that environment, you know.

SARAH

Neither am I. But there will be other parties and you will have to learn to be comfortable not drinking at them. (Pause) Wait. Are you telling me that you snuck out of the party, abandoning me without a ride because you wanted to go study?

RACHEL ONE

I knew that you wouldn't understand.

SARAH

Do you know who I had to get a ride from that night? Tommy Flannigan. He was pawing me the whole ride, saying, "I bet I could make you bat for our team, again. You just haven't met the right guy." I got out and called my mom at two in the morning!

RACHEL ONE

I just couldn't get my mind off of that grade, you know. It won't happen again, I promise.

SARAH

I have heard this too many times this year. (Pause) You didn't even try to find me at school on Monday. I have been put on the back burner and I came here to tell you that I won't do it anymore. You have to learn how to live your life AND get good grades or you will never survive college. You'll never survive life. (Pause) I want to break up.

RACHEL ONE

(Pleading) I won't do it again.

SARAH

You said that two weeks ago before your Chem test and a month ago before your History presentation. (Pause)
I'm sorry, but it's not going to work.

[MR. WRIGHT enters with a paper in hand.]

MR. WRIGHT

Good morning, ladies. Sarah, you need to get to your first class. The bell is about to ring.

SARAH

Thanks, Mr. Wright. We're finished here, anyway.

[SARAH exits]

MR. WRIGHT

Rachel. Good news. You passed your quiz with flying colors! An "A". As usual.

RACHEL ONE

Great.

[SARAH enters and speaks directly to the audience]

SARAH

I'm crying... I'm looking at pictures from our first date...then at our yearbook... She's changed so much in these last few months... Where is my Hunnybunny? No more smiles...the twinkle in her eye... and the thunder of her laughter all gone... *[PARTY PEOPLE begin to move. Through the center of the group, we see two people helping RACHEL TWO walk.]* They've been replaced by silence and the clanking of bottles... I guess she loves the bottle more than me now...

RACHEL TWO

Hey, guys! I'm fine!

STANLEY

No, you aren't. Rachel, you really have to learn to hold your liquor. I'm tired of dragging you home.

PARTY PERSON ONE

If you hadn't started yelling and taking your top off, the usher wouldn't have asked us to leave before the end of the movie.

RACHEL ONE

(She sits, propping her legs up) Thanks, guys. You are my best friends, did you know that? I love you guys. Call me tomorrow, okay?

[Overlapping as they exit.]

STANLEY

Whatever.

PARTY PERSON ONE

I'll get right on that.

[SARAH crosses to RACHEL TWO and throws RACHEL TWO's feet off the couch – more violently than usual.]

RACHEL TWO

Uh, oh. (mockingly) Is your little hunnybunny in trouble?

SARAH

That's not funny.

RACHEL TWO

Did my mom let you in before she left for work? What's wrong?

SARAH

What's wrong? Where should I begin to tell you what's wrong? You know what, I have been trying to tell you what's wrong for weeks now and you haven't listened. So, why start now.

RACHEL TWO

Wow. You are such a buzz-kill.

SARAH

What did you just say to me? (Calming herself) I don't even know you anymore. If you've come here thinking that I'm going to hold your hair while you barf up your fifth of Jack, you came to the wrong place. I can't even be near you you stink so bad. (Pause) We had a date. (Pause) Again.

RACHEL TWO

(Pause) I'm sorry. I forgot...

SARAH

...again.

RACHEL TWO

(Moving to hug her) I said that I'm sorry and I REALLY am sorry. Will you forgive me? Pleeeeeease? Look, STANLEY wanted to go to the movies to see that new Lindsey Lohan flick – which was not so good, by the way – and Joe dragged me along. He brought some beer to the theater, I got out of hand, we got kicked out. That's all. It won't happen again, I promise. (She gives SARAH puppy-dog eyes)

SARAH

Don't do that. No, it's not going to work this time. I have fallen for it time and time again. I'm telling you now that it's over. You understand, over.

RACHEL TWO

Fine. I don't need another mother chiding me and telling me what to do. Get out! I don't need you. I have friends that like me no matter what.

SARAH

Losing you, I mean really losing you...you break my heart.

[SARAH exits. RACHEL TWO moves lays on the floor.]

MOTHER

Rachel I want to know if there is anything you need to tell me? You haven't been acting yourself for a long time.

RACHEL TWO

Mom, we have this conversation once a week for months and I tell you every time I'm fine. Just leave me alone.

[MOTHER turns to exit when she spots an empty liquor bottle on the floor. She turns back to RACHEL TWO.]

MOTHER

Rachel what is this?

RACHEL TWO

Nothing, Mom. It's none of your business.

MOTHER

Yes, it is. If you're drinking in my house there will be some serious consequences.

RACHEL TWO

What are you going to do kick me out? GET THE HELL OUT OF MY ROOM!

MOTHER

That's it, Rachel. I don't know what to do with you anymore. I want you out of here. Go live with your father till you clean up your act.

RACHEL TWO

Mom. No.

[RACHEL TWO freezes. RACHEL ONE enters and crosses CC.]

RACHEL ONE

It's been 3 years... almost our whole high school experience... I found pictures from our first date today... The Carnival... this is my hunnybunny...my lover... my best friend... she really is my everything... I love her... I can't lose her. I'm going to fight for her. I want to spend the rest of my life with her. I want her smiles... that twinkle in her eye.. and the laughter.

[SARAH enters.]

SARAH

Hi. I brought you a bag of your stuff back.

RACHEL ONE

Thanks for coming over. I have something for you, too.

SARAH

What is this?

RACHEL ONE

Open it.

SARAH

(Opening the box) Oh, my god. It's beautiful...why?

RACHEL ONE

I realized something last night. I was in my room staring at the ceiling (RACHEL TWO looks up at the ceiling) thinking about not being with you anymore. It may be true that if I don't find a way to balance work and life I won't survive. But I know for a fact that I will simply die without you. You make everything shinier, every moment happier, everyday worth waking up for. Please take me back. (RACHEL TWO puts her head back in her hands.)

SARAH

No more back burner?

RACHEL ONE

No more back burner, only the front. Heck, you are the entire stove! (They laugh & hug) Oh, my phone is ringing. (she answers) Hello? Okay great. Uh huh. Oh, thank you so much Mr. Thompson. Yes sir! [Hangs up phone. turns to mother & Sarah] I got the job!

MOTHER

That's wonderful.

SARAH

When do you start?

RACHEL ONE

Saturday morning. Bright eyed and bushy tailed.

MOTHER

I'm so proud of you. I can't believe you're all grown up and so successful already. (They hug.) Rachel, I am so proud of all that you have done. I know that we weren't always able to give you everything you needed...

RACHEL ONE

Life may not be easy or perfect, but that's what keeps us interested in living, right? There was a time when I wished that I could be on a different path, with more friends and fun, but honestly I am the happiest I have ever been in my OWN life.

[ALL freeze. RACHEL TWO moves CC.]

RACHEL TWO

That could have been me. I could have had it all. I did have it all and I traded it for all the wrong things. I wish I could go back...(she closes her eyes).

[Time moves and we are back at the party. All of the PARTY PEOPLE enter and begin dancing. RACHEL TWO looks around confused. SARAH comes up to her, hugging her. STANLEY crosses to her with a solo cup.]

STANLEY

Hey, Rachel, congrats on that big scholarship. You're going to be a Harvard girl and leave all us little people behind, huh? Hey, can I get you a drink? You, of all of the people here, deserve it.

RACHEL TWO

No!!! I mean, no. I don't drink. Thanks.

[Actors freeze. Music plays. Actors transition to Monologues. Music fades.]

Monologues 2

BECKY

As I sat there alone in my car, abandoned by three people who I thought were my friends, I tried to wrap my brain around what had just happened. Why can't I seem to learn from my mistakes and move on? Why does this continue to happen to me time and time again? Why do I open my heart and soul and give all my trust to people, who don't really care about me? I was swarmed with memories of the past, of high school and middle school, of faces and voices that at this point all seemed to blur into one. All of the times I was pushed aside, ignored, and abandoned. All of the times my insecurities became a target because someone else was feeling insecure. Then suddenly, *it all made perfect sense*. At some, long before this moment, I decided to make a promise to myself, to never put anyone else through what I was forced to endure. I was determined to treat everyone with respect and empathy; even the very people who continued to disrespect me. Besides there are two sides to every story, and people are only human, with their own insecurities and histories. Somewhere along the line though, my own side of the story has been lost in the shuffle, and with it my voice and my very spirit.

BECKY (cont)

I still believe in the importance of treating others with respect. The pact I made with myself still holds firm, because while I cannot control how others think or feel or behave, I *can* do everything in my power to make the cycle stop with me. But I need to stop being a hypocrite, and to treat myself with respect I deserve it every bit as much as others. I can avoid repeating past mistakes, I can avoid placing myself in situations where I know I will be hurt, and I can do all this while still keeping an open mind and remembering that everyone has their own story to tell. From now on, my voice will be heard & my story will be remembered.

[Becky exits TC crosses to Center]

TC

I don't know who to blame, myself, the other person involved, booze, partying. I don't know, all I know is that my life will never be the same.

I think to myself most nights that I'm probably going to die alone. That I won't find that one person that will love me for who I am. Now I know it's bad to get down on yourself like I do. But it's something you can't help when you're alone, and yearning for someone to love.

Dating has changed for me. I have gone from being afraid of making the first move, to being afraid of what people might think. My life is so much harder now, and I wish it can go back to normal. But that is one wish I know will never come true.

See most people look at me and think they have me all figured out. They look at me and see a person who lives his life with little to no problems, but that is just a mask that I put on. Because deep down inside I yearn for someone to love me, I yearn to be happy, I yearn to be free in a world that forces people to hide who they really are. I want to be all that I dream of being I want all the love in the world and more. I want the world to know the real me.

My name is TC, I'm 20 years old and I was born in Las Vegas, NV. I'm a dancer, a actor, a good friend, and I'm HIV Positive. I guess you weren't expecting that.

So yeah, next time you think that you have a hard time finding love. Think about what I might have to go through, or what might run through my mind at any given moment. Because love for me is a true battlefield.

[TC exits. Actors transition to STR8LENE'S CLOSET. Music up and then fades.]

STR8LENE'S CLOSET

TC: Miss Manners

Jean: TJ

Troy: Miss Behavin'

Becky: Manager

Jose: Juan

Gloria: Jaymee

MISS MANNERS

Good Morning, everyone.

MISS B. HAIVIN'

What a great studio audience!

MISS MANNERS

Yes, it is!! To all those of you viewing at home, it is a beautiful day here in Boston, Massachusetts and we are so glad you could join us. It's time again for another etiquette lesson by Miss Manners...

MISS B. HAIVIN'

And Miss B. Haivin'.

MISS MANNERS

As you know we wrote the book on the art of being polite -- literally! Today we are going to find out ways we can all be more supportive of our gender non-conforming friends.

MISS B. HAIVIN'

Can you say gender non-conforming? *(Miss B. Haivin' improvises response based on audience participation - Wonderful! Or Oh, don't worry. You are about to learn all about it)*

MISS MANNERS

Now, what do we mean when we say gender non-conforming? Well, everyone is different in this great big world. We are each a unique combination of race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexual orientation.

MISS B. HAIVIN'

When it comes to gender, each of us express our gender differently and it has nothing to do with our sexual orientation or who we like to date!

MISS MANNERS

If you are gender non-conforming you may be a boy who likes to wear make-up or a girl that loves her baggy pants and work boots. All of it is okay with me!!

MISS B. HAIVIN'

And me, too!!

MISS MANNERS

Today, we are going to take a look at one of the many challenges non-gender conforming people face everyday.

MISS B. HAIVIN'

What you are about to see is a dramatization of actual events.
[TJ & JAYMEE enter. JAYMEE is pulling TJ onstage.]

JAYMEE

Come on! You need to trust me, okay? This is the place for us to find our outfits for the dance tonight.

TJ

You don't understand, Jaymee. I have had so many problems in this store. The people who work here have harassed me, so I really don't want to shop here anymore.

JAYMEE

You were alone all those times. You are here with me, now. Everything will be fine. *(To store clerk)* Excuse me, where is the ladies section?

JUAN

The women's section is over here and the men's section is over there.

JAYMEE

Thank you. *(To TJ)* You want to come with me?

TJ

No way! You know I ain't one of those femmey looking girls like you. I'm going to the men's section.

JAYMEE
Okay, I will meet you at the dressing room, okay?

[They move to opposite ends of the stage. Pick out clothes, then move center.]

JAYMEE
Did you find what you wanted?

TJ
I think so. We are going to look so fine for the dance. Let's go try this stuff on. (To clerk) Two please.
[Clerk hands her a number.]

JAYMEE
One please. (Receives her number) Thank you.
[JAYMEE and TJ move stage left towards the women's dressing room]

JUAN
Excuse me, sir. Your dressing room is over here.

TJ
Oh, yeah. Sorry about that.
[All re-enactors freeze.]

MISS B. HAIVIN'
Uh, oh. It looks like things have gotten a little sticky for our gender non-conforming lady.

MISS MANNERS
The first mistake that the store clerk made was making assumptions about someone's gender. The second mistake was presuming that this individual was incapable of making a choice about which dressing room they were most comfortable in.

MISS B. HAIVIN'
That's two strikes for the store clerk.
[Re-enactors unfreeze. MANAGER enters before TJ can move to the men's dressing room.]

MANAGER
Juan, may I speak with you for a moment.

JUAN
Sure.
[JUAN moves away from the dressing room area to speak with MANAGER.]

TJ
I can't go into the guy's dressing room!

JAYMEE
You shouldn't have to. He just assumed that you were a boy with the way that you dress. Let's go now while he isn't looking.

[They move into the dressing room and begin to try on their clothes.]

TJ

Hey, Jaymee. Can you help me tie this tie? I'm having technical difficulties.

JAYMEE

Sure. Come on out.

[JAYMEE begins to help TJ with her tie. They are laughing about how hard it is to get it right. JUAN hears them in the dressing room and enters quickly.]

JUAN

Excuse me. You can't be in here, sir. I told you that your dressing room was on the other side.

JAYMEE

I'm here with my friend. I'm not doing anything wrong.

JUAN

I don't think that you understand. Going into the wrong dressing room is against store policy. And it's illegal.

TJ

It's illegal? Why?

JUAN

Why is it illegal? I don't know. I guess because most women don't feel comfortable with men sharing dressing rooms with them.

TJ

Because men are incapable of controlling themselves?

JUAN

Yes. Because men are incapable of controlling themselves. And it is our responsibility to keep women safe.

JAYMEE

Don't you mean, keep women scared?

JUAN

Look, I am not going to debate the law with you. You need to leave.

TJ

I AM A GIRL!

JUAN

There is no way that you're a girl. Prove it.

TJ

What? (Defiant) You want me to prove it?

[TJ motions as if to lift her shirt. All re-enactors freeze.]

MISS B. HAIVIN'

Oh, why did they stop? I am loving this.

MISS MANNERS

Miss B. Haivin', having to prove your gender to every stranger you meet is not fun for our gender non-conforming friends. Let's see if they can get out of this mess.

[Re-enactors unfreeze. MANAGER steps into the dressing room.]

MANAGER

Oh, my gosh. JUAN!! What is going on here? Why are you in the ladies dressing room?

JUAN

I caught this boy in here and he won't get out.

(overlapping)

TJ

I'm not a boy!

JAYMEE
She's not a boy!

MANAGER

There seems to be some sort of misunderstanding. The two of you are making other customers uncomfortable. I think that it's time for you to leave. Juan, will you escort them out of the store, please?

JAYMEE

What?! She just came in to try on clothes!! You act like she has broken the law by not dressing like other girls.

TJ

(Defeated) Jaymee, stop. They aren't going to get it. (To MANAGER & CLERK) I didn't want to cause trouble. I just wanted to try on clothes.

JAYMEE

(To clerks) You should be disgusted with yourselves.

MANAGER

Perhaps if you made an effort to dress appropriately, people would not be so presumptuous. If you dress like a boy, people will think that you are a boy. We did nothing wrong. We were just trying to adhere to our policies. It is our job to make sure that women feel safe...

TJ

Yeah, we've been over this. Funny thing is, I don't feel safe at all. (Pause) Let's go, Jaymee.

[JAYMEE & TJ exit SL, MANAGER & JUAN exit SR]

MISS B. HAIVIN'

(Wiping tears away) What a horrible story. Did that really happen?

MISS MANNERS

That really happens in dressing rooms, bathrooms, schools, workplaces, restaurants – everywhere – everyday for our gender non-conforming friends.

MISS B. HAIVIN'

It's so sad. Why can't we all just get along?!!

MISS MANNERS

Pull yourself together...So, what is the lesson here for all of us? Don't assume someone's gender based on the clothes that they wear or how they look.

MISS B. HAIVIN'

All of us identify differently and represent that identity differently. We should appreciate the diverse tapestry that makes up our world.

MISS MANNERS

Thank you for joining us. I'm Miss Manners...

MISS B. HAIVIN'

And I'm Miss B. Haivin'.

MISS MANNERS

Reminding you to be respectful, finish your vegetables and always use your napkin! See you tomorrow!

[Actors freeze. Music plays. Actors transition to CLOSING. Music fades.]

CLOSING

MIKE

My name is Mike.

MAGGIE

Maggie.

BECKY

Becky here.

TC

I'm TC

MANUEL

I am Manuel.

JEAN

Jean here.

SANDY

My name is Sandy.

GLORIA

I'm Gloria.

TROY

Troy. Call us what you want...Not Just A Character.

THE END

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